I can hear the voice, but I don't know what it's saying.
Somewhere deep in my brain,
a noise between the rush of blood and electrical charges,
a sound, or is it

a feeling?

It's dark and low, a voice like a hum of words
rising from a hundred throats,
or the beat of a drum in tune to feet on hard earth,

or one bird call

long and low at dusk
as the light dips below a ridgeline
and the land

becomes blue.

1. Gone to Earth

I should have been in bed, sleeping like the rest of the country, not on an ice-cold rock on a cliff top before the dawn of New Year's Day. But as my eyes opened in the darkness of a winter night, I'd felt the same agitation that had been keeping me awake for months, heard the same sounds whispering in my head, and I'd had to go . . .

. . . through the enclosed, narrow streets of Polruan, where curtains were drawn and quietness had settled. All the revellers, fireworks and noise of the night before had disappeared. A dark stillness had returned, broken only by pools of streetlight and the sense of the river moving, wide and deep near its mouth, but heaving inland with the force of the tide, the surface shattering into a thousand reflected lights. Only one boat was moored in the fast-running current, its bows straining on the anchor chain, its stern drifting in a rhythmic fishtail motion. I walked beyond the last of the houses and out on to the open field. I didn't need a torch; I'd come to know this route so well that even in the gloom my feet found their way to a foot-wide strip of worn earth that winds its way through gorse and rock, up steep-hewn steps where the land falls away to the sea, breaking against the deep blackness of the cliff below. Then beneath the arched, wind-shaped hawthorn, bent and contorted as it shadows the shape of the land. Up rough broken ground, my feet barely visible, through the gate to where the land flattens and the wind rises. I couldn't see it but I knew it was there. I could feel the pull of the coast in both directions and as I stretched my arms wide and blended into the unseen, craggy,

well-known shapes my exhaled breath became the wind, as did I.

In a field just back from the coast path I found my way to a small rocky outcrop surrounded by an arc of gorse bushes, where the sheep had worn away the grass as they'd pushed themselves in to shelter from the weather. A place to stop and sit. The agitation in my body began to fade and I let go, slipping beneath the wave of exhaustion. The darkness was dense and impenetrable but the air hissed through the gorse above my head, carrying the acidic scent of the needled leaves, as the weight of the sea on the cliff below boomed through the earth in a steady rhythmic vibration. I curled in a ball, the hood of my coat pulled over my hat, gloved hands under my armpits, and my thoughts finally moved outside my head, dissipating in the wild black air. No voice in my head, only silence. I couldn't think any more, only feel, and I gave in to sleep, a deep, brief, total oblivion.

A slight wash of light broke the darkness, bringing me back into my aching, cramped body, but I didn't move; I stayed curled tight, my body wrapped, hanging on to a small scrap of warmth. A dark form slipped through the greyness overhead, his firm tail and long broad wings tipping only slightly into the wind as he dipped over the cliff edge, disappearing from view. My eyes held the clearing skyline, waiting for his return, not blinking in case I missed him. My head ached from the effort and my attention slipped to the horizon as the slightest slither of golden light began to break, brief and brilliant, before a curtain of squalling rain far out at sea obscured the wonder. Then he came silently back from below, rising into the sky without effort and hanging above the scrub of the headland. His dark back and black-tipped wings almost blended with the low sky; only the flash of white above his tail gave him away as a harrier hoping for breakfast.

Uncurling with a dull pain in my hips, I crawled out from beneath the gorse to see a badger leaving the coast path and

climbing up through the field towards some undergrowth at the far fence. His short, stubby legs moved quickly through the patchy tufted grass. Caught out by the light, up too late, stirred from his winter slowness, he'd been driven into the cold night by hunger, but now he needed to be back in his sett, deep underground, safe, warm and hidden from view. He paused at the wide entrance to his tunnel, looking around, checking the air. Then he was gone, slipping into his safe invisible world. He'd gone to earth.

In the faint greying lift of light I climbed on to the last rock and sat with my feet hanging over the edge. At the edge of the land and the start of the sea. In a space between worlds, at a time between years, in a life between lives. I'm lost, but here, at least for a moment, I'm found.

Back through the village and still nothing was stirring. In Fowey, on the opposite side of the river, a few lights were on. People were groggily making coffee, turning up the heating and going back to bed. I followed the path-wide streets to the huge looming bulk of the chapel, through the iron gate and along a concrete-paved corridor between the building and the cliff face. Through the door to the narrow apartment at the back. The cold had crept into my bones and my body ached all over. But I thought I'd found a sense of understanding that I'd been searching for since the day we arrived at the chapel, since the day we'd walked through that door for the first time. The day we'd put our rucksacks down on the bare floor at the end of a 630-mile walk, unlaced our muddy boots and tried to rediscover how to live under a roof. Finally I thought I knew why I couldn't settle, why I was restless, sleepless. I made tea and took it up the stairs to Moth, my husband, lover, friend of over thirty years.

He was lying spreadeagled on the mattress in the bedroom; even the growing light of the day finding its way through a

stained-glass window hadn't woken him. Nothing seemed to wake him; he could sleep for twelve hours and still need more. But I shook him and started his day as usual, with tea and two Rich Tea biscuits.

'Moth, wake up, there's something I've got to do.'

'What? What are you doing – why are you dressed?'

'I couldn't sleep.'

'Again?'

'I know, I'm so tired, but there's something I have to do.'

Pushing the foam mattress to the corner of the room next to the cardboard wardrobe where our clothes hung left a large space on the lino-covered floor. We took a green package out of the rucksack that stood in the opposite corner, unzipped the case and shook out the familiar bundle of nylon. Unfurling the tent, I was hit with the smell of damp and sand, wind, rain and ozone-fresh, gull-filled air. I was outside, in the wild, on every shade of red, black and brown soil, in damp mossy woods and deep hidden valleys.

'You do what you need to do but I think I might still use the mattress. I'm actually getting used to the comfort again.'

'Okay, but I need to try this. I can't carry on without sleep.'

I clicked the duct-tape-bound poles back together with a rising sense of anticipation as they slotted into position and the green dome rose into shape. Crawling into the damp-smelling space it created, I was overcome with a rush of joy. Moth went to make more tea while I dragged in the old battered inflatable mats and sleeping bags and took a pillow off the bed. I was back. This was it. My face sank into the pillow, the world slipped away and sleep washed over me on an incoming tide of relief. I'd gone to earth.

2. Invisible

When the Christmas holiday ends and students miserably return to the classroom, very few are in their mid-fifties and starting to forget as fast as they learn. We stood in the kitchen-living area of the chapel going through Moth's daily checklist before he headed to university for the day. Phone, wallet, glasses, check; van keys, check; notepad with the list of what you're doing today, check.

'See you tonight then.'

'Yep, see you later.' And he was gone, but I could still hear his footsteps walking unevenly down the side of the chapel into the dull light of a winter morning. Closing the door I was back inside the long narrow corridor-like space of the flat. I sat at the table with a cup of tea and thought about the day ahead. Waiting for the bread to pop from the toaster, my eyes scanned the bookshelf, searching for something to delay the moment when I had to open the laptop to spend more hours in the soul-destroying hunt for an employer who was on the lookout for an unqualified fifty-something with no employment record. The small bookshelf held just a random selection of books that had come out of a packing box. A few scattered volumes picked up in the last hours before we left our house. Whenever I looked at those books they took me straight back to that last moment before we walked out for the final time. Evicted from the dream that had been our family home, where we ran our holiday rental for visitors to come and stay, where we kept sheep and grew vegetables, the home where our children grew up, our world for twenty years. Before a financial dispute with a lifelong friend ended in a court

case that resulted in us being served with an eviction notice. Those few books collected before we closed the door and left our old lives behind, never to return, held the sound of bailiffs as they hammered at the door, the fear of not knowing if we would ever find shelter again, and an overwhelming sadness. But if I'd known this would be the only box of books we'd bring with us into our new life I might have packed a better selection. I ran my hand across them in search of something, anything to take me out beyond the walls, beyond the chapel. *A Field Guide to Fungi*, maybe, though probably not in January; *Outsider II*, definitely not; *Five Hundred Mile Walkies*, that book, the one that had led to the most unexpected adventure. No, there was only one that would do the trick. *The South West Coast Path: From Minehead to South Haven Point*, Paddy Dillon's beautiful guidebook to the 630-mile path. The book that had guided us all the way to Polruan. The friend in our pocket as we decided not to give in to the chaos of homelessness, but to put our rucksacks on our backs and walk the whole length of the path Paddy describes, living wild, homeless and penniless on its cliffs and beaches.

The plastic cover on the little brown book was still intact, the pages bound together with a black elastic hair band. As I took it off the stiff pages bulged in ripples that had echoes of a hard sand beach on an outgoing tide. Between the pages, some stuck together in rain-damaged clumps, were postcards, feathers, grasses, scraps of paper and flowers. Memories of a path that falls from cliff top to sea level and back, until the rollercoaster of wilderness has followed the whole coastline of the south-west of England and the walker has climbed the equivalent of Everest nearly four times.

I buttered the toast and waited for the phone to ring. Moth's call to say that he had arrived at university, and wasn't sitting in a café in Truro or walking on the beach at Watergate Bay because he'd begun to drive to university, then forgotten where he was

going and convinced himself that he had some other destination to go to. I thumbed the pages of the small book, almost reluctant to look inside. It held sunlit, windswept memories of months spent on cliff tops in all weathers. But there was something else in there: darker memories of the pain and sadness of the awful week that had driven us to make that walk. We were different people then, desperate, anxious, frightened people, trying to cram twenty years of life into packing boxes with only days left before we had to leave our house, thinking that losing our home was the worst thing that could possibly happen to us. But a routine hospital appointment during that week had changed those thoughts. As the lights of our life were going out, a doctor sat on the corner of his table and switched off the final lamp.

I closed the book. Did I really want to go back to that week, to feel the horror again? Too late: it was already with me. No escaping the memory of Moth's body clenched tight as he was diagnosed with a neurodegenerative disease that had neither treatment or cure. No escaping the sense of fear that returned whenever I remembered being told that the pain in Moth's shoulder, a numbness in his left side and dark fog of mental paralysis slowly taking his thoughts wasn't just old age, but actually corticobasal degeneration, CBD, a creeping unstoppable disease with only a short time left to run its course to the end. And as the doctor painted a picture of Moth's body forgetting how to swallow and pneumonia making him choke on his own saliva, we realized how wrong we'd been: far worse things were waiting for us than becoming homeless.

I put the kettle back on. He should be there by now – why hadn't he called? I turned the pages, carefully peeling apart the clumps of dried paper, Paddy's descriptions of the path leaping out in punctuations of memory. 'Drifts a little inland and uphill': I laughed at the thought of us standing at the start of the walk and reading that line as we looked at a steep path following a

zigzag up a near-vertical cliff. But as the pages finally began to separate, Moth was there in the margins and I could see his face as he looked up at me in the torchlight of a dark evening, when the last of the light had faded over the horizon and the green dome of the tent enclosed us in the two sheets of our damp, nylon home. Still the same wild, unstoppable man I'd loved for all of my adult life, sitting on his sleeping bag as I lay in mine, heavy-eyed but watching him write. He was there, smiling as he wrote in tiny spidery words in the margins of the guidebook, capturing the days we had just spent on cliff tops and beaches, camping on headlands and rocky ledges. 'Camped on Leskey's Ledge, more in the sea than beside it.' 'I'm so hungry I ate Ray's biscuit, don't think she noticed.' 'Opened the tent to find we're only a metre from the cliff edge.' 'Blackberries.' 'The sea is like syrup, I have become the sea.' 'Held Ray's hand at the edge of all things.' 'Today I walked with a tortoise.'

Touching the faded pencilled words, I was with him in the wind and the rain, watching his feet as they followed the path ahead of me, blown forward into a new world. A world of university and the chapel, where the Coast Path ran past the front gate and I waited for him to return. He hadn't called – where was he?

As the pages slowly separated, page 140 appeared: Portheras Cove. 'Dolphins and high tide.' 'I ran with the tent above my head.' 'Is this real?' That magical moment when we realized that he was defying the doctors who'd said CBD had no treatment or cure and his health couldn't improve. The night when we ran up the beach in the moonlight. Running away from the incoming tide, holding the fully erected tent above our heads, and learnt how to hope again. After the walk, before he started university, we'd told the doctor about how Moth's health had improved, how he had done something that every authority on the illness said was impossible. The doctor hadn't been excited.

'Start the degree if you want to, but be prepared to give it up.' Implying Moth might not make it to the end.

We didn't believe him, didn't want to believe. And yet as the time passed and the pressures of his degree meant Moth was becoming more sedentary, the health and ease of movement he'd found on the cliff tops was leaving him. In the quiet coldness of the winter the stiffness had returned, his aching body slowing again. Each day now began with a struggle to stand upright and as he took each shaky early-morning step a creeping sense of inevitability had set in. A reluctant acceptance of what the doctor had said; he probably wouldn't be able to finish the degree. He certainly wouldn't finish the course if he kept disappearing; maybe I should start taking him to uni and picking him up later? No, it was a struggle for both of us to survive on his student loan; we certainly couldn't afford the petrol needed to make the journey twice a day. What I needed was a tracking device. I closed the book, overwhelmed with the sadness of the thought that the day would come when Moth couldn't remember what we did. The day when CBD had crept so far that the clear, magical, wild experience we'd shared was lost to him forever and I'd be left alone with the memory. The day when the guidebook would be the only record that our walk had ever happened.

Where the hell was he?

I switched the lights on. Mid-morning; the sun had already moved beyond the point where it shone into the flat and it was getting darker. I finished the tea and sat at the table gazing out of the tall chapel window that looked out on to the wall of the neighbour's garden. At six feet high it half-filled the view, but above that was the upper terrace of garden shrubs and a magnolia tree. A large brown rat dropped out of the ivy and walked across the top of the wall; then he stopped, looking in at me, his round eyes staring until he turned around and went back the

way he came. I opened the door to see where he'd gone. I could hear him, but I couldn't see him, just the wall of ivy that clad the cliff face a metre and a half away from the door. From the dark damp corridor of greenness between the chapel wall and the cliff, my eyes followed his trail of rustling leaves upwards through the ivy. Up there, between the buddleia bushes and the roof of the chapel, was a thin blue strip of sky, a world where the sun shone and the wind blew and I knew I had to be there; a dark sense of enclosure had borne down on me and I had to get out.

Grabbing my coat and phone, I hurried out into the street, intending to follow it up to the open cliffs, as I had every day since we'd moved to the chapel. The narrow street, hardly wide enough for a car to pass through, seemed full of people. People walking, talking, loud gesticulating people. I walked a short way along the road, but was suddenly gripped by an overwhelming sense of panic and pressed myself against the garden wall of a terrace of houses until the people had passed. What was happening? I couldn't understand the pulsing sensation in my head, and the reddening face. Not a hot flush, they were in the past, but what was happening? Was I ill? More people walked by, noisy, busy people.

'Hi, lovely day.'

It was all I could do to mutter a muted 'hi' in response. I didn't know what to do or which way to turn, but found myself running back to the chapel, slamming the iron gate behind me and disappearing down the concrete alleyway. I lay on the floor of the flat trying to calm my breathing, my thoughts racing. Gradually my head stopped pounding and I realized that in the year since we'd arrived at the chapel I'd barely said a word to anyone other than Moth or our two children when they phoned or occasionally visited. When out alone I didn't speak if I could avoid it; if I was with Moth I let him do the talking.

Had I tried to talk to anyone since we'd moved there? There'd

been opportunities in the shop when I could have had a conversation while the lady behind the counter filled my bag and asked me, 'Are you living here now? I've seen you a few times. Where have you moved from – out of Cornwall, obviously?' She had done so numerous times, but I'd avoided a conversation on each occasion, just muttering 'thank you', grabbing the bag and leaving. There had been moments when people in the street had stopped to look at the façade of the tall, imposing chapel and asked about its history, and I'd said I wasn't sure but I'd get Moth because he knew all about it. Then I'd scuttled to the back of the chapel and stayed there. I was in a state of hyper-alert over-awareness whenever I left the flat. When we walked the path, our rucksacks stuffed with our possessions, I'd had no problems, so why now in the village did I feel this need to be invisible? Any hard-won grain of self-belief I'd found while we were walking had vanished, lost in the sea mist as it crept up the river. I sat up, angry with myself. So much time spent avoiding any interaction with people was ridiculous. I'd let this thing get out of control.

I found the laptop and put on the meditation channel I'd recently discovered. The cross-legged guru spoke to me in smooth tones.

'Breathe in and follow the breath out, and focus on the breath. Let go of all thoughts and follow the breath.'

I followed the breath. I was good at this. I could empty my head and follow my breath as if I was born to it. But even as I breathed, the sound crept in and wouldn't leave. A voice from some hidden, subdued, suppressed part of me that wouldn't be quiet. That deep resonating sound which felt like a question.

The phone rang. Yes, at last.

'Where are you? Don't tell me you're in St Ives?' Last time he'd forgotten where he was going, he'd called me from a café on the north coast, an hour away from uni. Maybe this time he'd headed west.

'Not today. I met one of the other students in the car park and she finally found the courage to ask me what I was doing in Cornwall and why I was on the course.' Moth was finding sharing the course with a roomful of twenty-somethings quite difficult; they seemed to live in an entirely different world to him.

'Can't believe no one's asked you before. What did you say?'

'I stuck to the line we used on the path – that we've sold the house and I'm studying as part of a career move into teaching.'

'Not really a lie, just a half-truth, but you've said it now so she'll tell everyone else. Can you keep it up?'

'Saves me having to explain how we lost the house and became homeless – it's just easier – but now they probably think I'm an ultra-wealthy mid-lifer having some sort of existential crisis.'

'Only a minor misconception then.'

I sagged into the chair with the relief of knowing he was where he should be. If only I could cope with this change in our lives the way he did. He just carried on being his full-on, outgoing, gregarious, story-telling self, despite occasionally not knowing where he was. The ragged, distorted threads of our lives were slowly beginning to re-form, but there was something eating into my peace of mind. Not just Moth's health but something else, in the dark confusion of my own head in the early hours of the morning, when I opened the door and looked for the sky and saw nothing but a thin strip of grey between the chapel and the rock face, when I walked into the street and it was full of people and there was nowhere to be alone. On so many days like that, I followed the path to the cliffs to stand with my face in the wind and feel the force of the weather: something that felt real. And always the voice in my head growing louder, like an onshore wind bringing a storm from the sea. Or was it the voice of my mum saying 'I told you so'? It was hard to say.

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Making my bed in the tent in the early days of the new year, I thought I'd solved my sleep problem: I'd simply been missing the familiarity of the tent; things would be absolutely fine now. I'd get more sleep; then I'd be stronger, more in control and able to focus my thoughts on living our new life in the village and making sure Moth didn't get lost. I huddled in the green dome in the corner of the bedroom, away from people and the world, unaware that only a few days later I'd find myself in the middle of the country, as far from the sea and the tent as I could possibly be.

3. *Hireth*

Death paced the hospital ward, but didn't stop at her bed. He cast a glance as she sat upright, her hair combed, her new blue cardigan clean and neatly buttoned. Not yet, not today, not on a Sunday. Today the deep, lung-shrinking wheeze of pneumonia had subsided and I sat by her bed as we thumbed through a glossy magazine. Moth was only a few days into the new term when I'd had the phone call. The hospital call that you always know will come one day, but never this day. Mum was in hospital with pneumonia, they thought she was slipping into sepsis and I needed to be there. Three days later and she'd shrugged it off and there was talk of her going home.

'Maybe tomorrow you could bring some nail varnish and make me look glamorous like the girls in the magazine pictures? It'd give us something to do. I'm getting bored now.'

After the stale air of the hospital, the dark cold of a late January night was a relief. I closed the van door, started the engine and headed back to Mum's tiny cottage. Along the lanes of central England, lanes so familiar I could have driven without headlights, to the warmth of her kitchen and the familiarity of her things. Her home, but not mine. My home, the place that formed me, moulded me into what I would become, was in the valley below, hidden in the black stillness of unlit countryside. I could feel its presence like a body in the room. Tomorrow I wouldn't go to the hospital until later, maybe the afternoon. Before that I would walk across the land and follow my older, smaller footprints through the fields I knew so well.

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Stepping out into the winter morning and a comforting pocket of warmth in the open porch at the back of the cottage, I reached up and put the key on the ledge, careful not to dislodge the dry and dusty swallow's nest. Such a well-chosen spot, where the morning sun takes the coldness of night at the earliest moment. They'd be back in the spring, squeezing new mud into the cracks of their old home, diving out in surprise every time the door opened. I followed the garden down through dewed grass and bare rose stems to the path that dropped into the mist in the valley. My vision was reduced, but I could hear the Canada geese on the lake. I didn't need to see; I already knew what the view would be. The spring migrants were arriving, stirring the complacency of the geese that chose to stay and overwinter there. They wouldn't be building nests yet, just squabbling over space and food.

Beyond the lake, their calls followed me faintly through the fog, and then it was all around: my roots, my childhood, the source of everything I was, a land so familiar I could map it in my mind like my own skin. I wouldn't go to the farmyard yet, I'd go through the fields first and look down at the farm, stall the moment, suck it all in.

I passed the sawmill where generations of villagers had cut the timber for houses and fencing. The carcasses of huge oaks, elm and beech had lain here, to my child's eye mountainous and never-ending. All gone now. The timber sawn, the saws gone, double-glazed windows where there had been broken dust-covered panes, roses by the door. The mist began to clear in the early yellow light as I walked out of the quietness of a copse of beech trees above the row of cottages and on to the Mountain. From the high point I could look down to the cottages where the estate workers had lived. The Scottish carpenter and his family in the larger cottage with the big garden, overflowing with vegetables to feed their five children; the plumber in the

middle with the wife that no one ever saw; and the gardener to the big house in the last cottage. As I climbed the hill away from them the first car was leaving, a commuter heading to work in the town from a smart modernized house in the countryside. The grassy slope wasn't a mountain, just a field on a steep hill, but we called it that. From there, I knew I could see it as I turned away from the tree-lined hill top and looked back into the valley. And there it was, glowing faintly pink in the morning sun. To anyone else it might have appeared as just a farmhouse in the distance, but I could see the details. The sash windows of the formal façade, the crumbling clay bricks and slate roof, and behind, out of sight, the main body of the house jutting out and forming a T to the front. I could almost hear its presence.

I headed on through High Ways field, the largest field on the farm, always kept for arable crops. I'd spent summers there, following a potato spinner as it passed up and down the ridged rows, throwing white soft-skinned new potatoes on to the damp earth. Walking bent over, collecting the potatoes into a bucket, emptying the bucket into a bag, the bags on to trailers, off the trailers into the sheds, from the sheds to a lorry, from the lorry to the shops and the chip shops. And winters, in the cold, damp and frost, cutting tops off turnips with a billhook and throwing them into a small wooden trailer to take back to the farm and tip into a shredder to feed to the bulls in the pens. When the other children from my school were playing with toys, or in the playground, I was here. Mud on my hands, in the sun and the wind, alone with the thoughts in my head. On the rare occasions when I did spend time with the others, it was as if I viewed them from a distance. Later, as a young teenager, I'd thought I wanted to be the same as my school friends, to focus on make-up and clothes. But, hard as I tried, I couldn't shake the sense of having one foot on the disco floor, one foot in the mud.

Down from the arable fields, through the woods of tall

deciduous trees, carpeted with bluebells in the spring and lined with campion and cow parsley in the summer. I'd spent days at the edge of these woods. Ten years old and I should have been playing with friends, but instead I sat alone where the woods became field and watched the rabbits moving across the grass. Hundreds and hundreds of wild brown rabbits grazing in the grass fields and moving across the winter corn like locusts. I'd loved the power of standing by the fence, almost obscured by the turning post, until I could see a haze of brown across the hillside, and then dashing out of hiding to clap my hands and watch the blanket of rabbits look up from eating before rushing towards their warren, like brown water sucked down a drain. As I grew older, I stopped clapping and instead spent hours just watching, observing the hierarchy of their brown world. The older ones venturing into the wider field, the young ones staying close to the mouth of the burrows, and the watchers. The rabbits that didn't hunch over to eat, but stayed upright, looking, listening and then sounding the alarm. Stamping their strong hind legs against the ground, creating a thudding noise that connected all the others with its signal, causing them to stop eating and, as one, run to the holes on the hillside and vanish.

When I reached the gamekeeper's cottage at the edge of the wood, I scanned across the field, but could see only green. I stood and instinctively clapped my hands, waiting for the brown movement. There was none; the field was still in the cold, damp winter air. The gamekeeper kept foxhounds for the hunt here, in kennels with outside compounds made of high iron railings. They bayed in loud voices that echoed around the valley whenever anyone passed. Strong, muscular, powerful dogs, but the gamekeeper could walk among them as they licked his hands like pets waiting for a treat, not the ruthless killers they were. I'd seen them rip a fox apart and I didn't need to be told to stay away; nothing could have made me go near them.

The gamekeeper's cottage stood at the furthest corner of the Park, a field where the sheep were held during the lambing season. The field dipped down behind his house, forming a corner between the kennel and the wood, and this is where the sheep would come. Sheltered by the woods, but exposed to the foxes living just beyond the treeline and right next to the hunting dogs whom they should have run from in fear. And yet, day after day, ewes chose that spot when their lambs were close to being born. Taking the risk that the foxes would be held at bay by the presence of their predators, they chose this place because when they were at their most vulnerable shelter was everything. A contradiction at the edge of the wood. But the railings are gone now, the kennels are a bungalow and a brand-new four-wheel drive stands outside the gamekeeper's cottage. Something else has changed too. As I walk over the ground that's so familiar I could have left it yesterday, something's different. The villagers have gone, replaced by commuters and retirees, taking the working heart out of the estate. But they've been gone for years; it's something more than that, something more fundamental that I can't quite put my finger on. I shrug it off with the thought that maybe it's me, and my response to the land; maybe I'm viewing it with different eyes.

To the Park. When the old farmhouse was the main house on the estate this would have been its formal entrance, with a gravel drive lined by oak trees. But in the eighteenth century a new hall had been built, leaving the old one to become just a large faded farmhouse. Only two of the oaks still stand, bark split with age, branches distorted, but still pushing to the sky, still searching for that one last ray of sunlight. The roots lift in swollen mounds around the base of the trunks; one is so pronounced it forms a lumpy seat around the base. I sat down to take in the best view. I could hear the echo of my own footfall, circling the tree for hours on late-summer days, hopping from root to root