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Holding tight

When you are broken, you run. But you don't always run away. Sometimes, helplessly, you run towards. My reasons weren't White's, but I was running just the same. It was a morning in early August, and I was four hundred miles from home. What I was doing felt like a drugs deal. It certainly looked like one. For minutes on end I'd paced up and down a Scottish quayside with a can of caffeinated soda in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and an envelope stuffed with £800 in twenty-pound notes in my back pocket. Over there in the car sat Christina, spectacularly impassive in a pair of aviator shades. She'd come along to keep me company, and I hoped she wasn't bored. She was probably bored. Perhaps she was asleep. I walked back to the car. It was my father's. I was driving it now, but the boot was full of things I couldn't bring myself to remove: 35mm film canisters; a crushed packet of aspirin; a newspaper with a half-finished crossword in my father's hand; a pair of winter gloves. I leaned against the bonnet, rubbed my eyes and looked out at the harbour, willing the ferry into view. A clear pool of turquoise was spreading out there over the Irish Sea; small crosses that were gulls traversed it. It seemed strange that it was day at all; both of us were wiped out from yesterday's long drive, and faintly freaked out by the hotel we'd stayed at the night before. *21st Century Hotel!* it said on a laminated paper sign by the door. When we opened it the first thing we saw was a

plastic bulldog sitting on a desk, grimacing at us with the malevolent, merry belligerence of a thing from a nightmare.

In the hotel room we found a broken computer, a sink that wasn't plumbed in, and a fully functioning cooker we'd been instructed not to use under any circumstances. 'Health and Safety,' the hotelier had explained, rolling his eyes. There were, unexpectedly, two televisions, acres of brown suedette stapled to the walls, and a bathroom with a six-foot sunken bath into which Christina subsided, marvelling at the tea-tinted peat water. I collapsed into a chair, the journey running in my mind like a road-movie directed by a drug-addled auteur. Giant Irn-Bru trucks full of orange, bubblegum-flavoured fizzy Scottish soda. A raven standing in a puddle by the side of the road, wet-trousered and chisel-beaked. Motorway service station A. Motorway service station B. A sandwich. A large cup of undrinkable coffee. Endless miles. More skies. A near-accident caused by inattention on a hillside somewhere. Motorway service stations C and D. I massaged my aching right calf, blinked away the after-images, and got to making jesses.

I should have made them before, but I couldn't. Only now did the hawk seem real enough to make them necessary. Jesses are the soft leather straps that fit through the leather anklets on a trained hawk's legs. Singular, *jess*. It's a French word from the fourteenth century, back when falconry was the favourite game of the ruling elite. A little scrap of social history in the name for a strip of leather. As a child I'd cleaved to falconry's disconcertingly complex vocabulary. In my old books every part of a hawk was named: wings were *sails*, claws *pounces*, tail a *train*. Male hawks are a third smaller than the female so they are called *tiercels*, from the Latin *tertius*, for *third*. Young birds are *eyasses*, older birds *passagers*, adult-trapped birds *haggards*. Half-trained hawks fly on a long line called a *creance*. Hawks don't wipe their beaks, they *feak*. When they defecate they *mute*. When they

shake themselves they *rouse*. On and on it goes in a dizzying panoply of terms of precision. The terms were precise for a reason. Knowing your falconry terminology attested to your place in society. Just as in the 1930s T. H. White worried about whether a hunting crop should be properly called a hunting whip, or a riding crop, or a riding whip, or just a crop, or a whip, so in the sixteenth century the Jesuit spy Robert Southwell was terrified he'd be found out because he kept forgetting his falconry terms. But the words weren't about social fear when I was small. They were magic words, arcane and lost. I wanted to master this world that no one knew, to be an expert in its perfect, secret language.

You can buy it all on the internet now: jesses, hoods, bells, gloves, everything. But when I began falconry, most of us made our own equipment. We'd buy swivels from deep-sea-fishing shops, leashes from ships' chandlers, beg offcuts from leather tanneries and shoe factories to make our own jesses and hoods. We adapted, we adopted, we usually didn't improve. Certainly I didn't. I spent countless hours waxing cotton thread, punching holes in my hands instead of leather in error, frowning, wiping blood away, trying again and again to cut and make and sew things that looked like the photographs in books, waiting for the glorious day when I might have a hawk of my own.

I have a suspicion that all those hours making jesses and leashes weren't just preparation games. In a scrapbook of my childhood drawings is a small pencil sketch of a kestrel sitting on a glove. The glove's just an outline, and not a good one – I was six when I drew it. The hawk has a dark eye, a long tail, and a tiny fluffy spray of feathers under its hooked beak. It is a happy kestrel, though a ghostly one; like the glove, it is strangely transparent. But one part of it has been carefully worked: its legs and taloned toes, which are larger than they ought to be, float above the glove because I had no idea how to draw toes that gripped. All the scales and talons on all the

toes are delineated with enormous care, and so are the jesses around the falcon's legs. A wide black line that is the leash extends from them to a big black dot on the glove, a dot I've gone over again and again with the pencil until the paper is shined and depressed. It is an anchor point. *Here*, says the picture, *is a kestrel on my hand. It is not going away. It cannot leave.*

It's a sad picture. It reminds me of a paper by the psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, the one about a child obsessed with string; a boy who tied together chairs and tables, tied cushions to the fireplace, even, worryingly, tied string around his sister's neck. Winnicott saw this behaviour as a way of dealing with fears of abandonment by the boy's mother, who'd suffered bouts of depression. For the boy, the string was a kind of wordless communication, a symbolic means of joining. It was a denial of separation. *Holding tight.* Perhaps those jesses might have been unspoken attempts to hold on to something that had already flown away. I spent the first few weeks of my life in an incubator, full of tubes, under electric light, skin patched and raw, eyes clenched shut. I was the lucky one. I was tiny, but survived. I had a twin brother. He didn't. He died soon after he was born. I know almost nothing about what happened, only this: it was a tragedy that wasn't ever to be spoken of. It was a time when that's what hospitals told grieving parents to do. Move on. Forget about it. Look, you have a child! Get on with your lives. When I found out about my twin many years later, the news was surprising. But not *so* surprising. I'd always felt a part of me was missing; an old, simple absence. Could my obsession with birds, with falconry in particular, have been born of that first loss? Was that ghostly kestrel a grasped-at apprehension of my twin, its carefully drawn jesses a way of holding tight to something I didn't know I'd lost, but knew had gone? I suppose it is possible.

But now my father had died. *Hold tight.* I hadn't ever imagined that making jesses could be a symbolic act. But as

I sat there, cutting hide into long strips, soaking them in warm water, stretching them, greasing them with leather dressing, turning them this way and that in this strange room of broken objects, I knew they were more than just pieces of leather. These were the cords that would hold me to the hawk, just as they would hold the hawk to me. I picked up the craft knife and tapered the end of one jess to a point with a long, smooth cut. *There*. I was conjuring presences, doing this. Suddenly the hawk was very real. And so, in a burst of remembrance so fierce he could have been there in the room, was my father. Grey hair, glasses, blue cotton shirt, a tie slightly askew, a cup of coffee in one hand and a look of amusement on his face. He used to make me cross by calling falconry equipment by the wrong names. He'd call hoods *hats*. Creances, *bits of string*. He did it on purpose. I'd get cross and correct him, thinking he was teasing me.

And now I saw that Dad had known exactly what these things were called, but in the world of the photojournalist, the more expert you were, the less likely you were to call anything by its proper name. For him, photographs were *snaps*. Cameras simply *kit*. It wasn't ever teasing. He was paying me a compliment. Bloody fourteenth-century French vocabulary. Shit. Shit shit *shit*. It wasn't his way at all. My throat hurt. My eyes hurt too, and my heart. I cut the end of the other jess. Shaking fingers. Then I placed the two jesses side by side on the glass tabletop. They matched. *Tomorrow*, I thought, *I'm meeting a man I don't know off the Belfast ferry and I'm going to hand him this envelope full of paper in exchange for a box containing a goshawk*. It seemed the unlikeliest thing imaginable.

The goshawk I was about to collect had been bred in an aviary near Belfast. Breeding goshawks isn't for the faint-hearted. I've had friends who've tried it and shaken their heads after only one season, scratching their newly greyed hair in a sort of post-

traumatic stupor. 'Never again', they say. 'Ever. Most stressful thing I've ever done.' Try it, and you discover there's a very fine line between goshawk sexual excitement and terrible, mortal violence. You have to watch your hawks constantly, monitor their behaviour, ready yourself for intervention. It's no good just putting a couple of goshawks in an aviary and leaving them to it. More often than not the female will kill her mate. So instead you house them in separate but adjoining solid-walled aviaries, with a barred hatch between the two through which the pair can see each other. As winter turns to spring they conduct their courtship, like Pyramus and Thisbe, through the gap in the wall, calling, displaying, dropping their powder-blue wings and fluffing their white undertail coverts that look for all the world like a pair of capacious marabou bloomers, and only when the female seems ready – a piece of fine judgement that does not admit error – do you let the male into the breeding chamber. If all goes well, they mate, lay eggs, and a new generation of home-bred goshawks, downy white chicks with bleary eyes and tiny talons, enters the world. I'd never met the breeder of my new hawk, but I knew already he was a man of steel nerves and superhuman patience.

White's hawk was taken from the wild. No one bred goshawks in captivity in the 1930s: there was no need to try. There were a hundred thousand wild gosses out there in European forests, and no import restrictions to speak of. Like nearly all falconers' goshawks back then, White's had come from a nest in Germany. 'A bundle of precipitous sticks and some white droppings' was how he imagined his hawk's birthplace: he'd never seen a goshawk nest. But you can see one, and there's no need to strike out into the forest to do so. There's live feed of goshawk nests, now, on the internet. One click, and you're given an up-close and personal view of the family life of this most secretive of hawks. There, in a four-inch box in low-resolution glitter, is a square of English woodland. The hissing you hear from your computer speakers

is a digitised amalgam of leaves, wind and chaffinch song. You see the nest itself, a bulky concatenation of sticks pushed hard up against conifer bark and lined with sprays of green leaves. On the webcam the male goshawk appears on the nest. It's so sudden, and he's so brightly shiny white and silver-grey, that it's like watching a jumping salmon. There's something about the combination of his rapidity and the lag of the compressed image that plays tricks with your perception: you carry an impression of the bird as you watch it, and the living bird's movements palimpsest over the impression the bird has made until he fairly glows with substance. Goshawk substance. And he bows his head and calls. *Chew-chew-chew-chew-chew-chew*. Black mouth, soft smoke in the cold April morning. And then the female arrives. She's huge. She lands on the edge of the nest and it shakes. Her gnarly feet make the male's look tiny. She is like an ocean liner. A Cunard goshawk. And on each leg, as she turns, you can see the leather anklets she wears. This bird was bred in captivity somewhere, in an aviary just like the one in Northern Ireland that bred mine. She was flown by a nameless falconer, was lost, and now here she is, settling on four pale eggs, being watched on computer screens as the very type of the wild.

Time passed on the Scottish quay and brightness moved in from the sea. Then a man was walking towards us, holding two enormous cardboard boxes like a couple of oversized suitcases. Strangely alien suitcases that didn't seem to obey the laws of physics, because as he walked they moved unpredictably, in concert neither with his steps nor with gravity. *Whatever is in them is moving*, I thought with a little thump of my heart. He set the boxes down, ran his hand through his hair. 'I'm meeting another falconer here in a bit. He's having the younger bird. Yours is the older. Bigger too,' he said. 'So.' He ran his hand through his hair again, exposing a long talon scratch across his wrist, angry at its edges and scurfed with

dried blood. 'We'll check the ring numbers against the Article 10s,' he explained, pulling a sheaf of yellow paper from the rucksack and unfolding two of the official forms that accompany captive-bred rare birds throughout their lives. 'Don't want you going home with the wrong bird.'

We noted the numbers. We stared down at the boxes, at their parcel-tape handles, their doors of thin plywood and hinges of carefully tied string. Then he knelt on the concrete, untied a hinge on the smaller box and squinted into its dark interior. A sudden *thump* of feathered shoulders and the box shook as if someone had punched it, hard, from within. 'She's got her hood off,' he said, and frowned. That light, leather hood was to keep the hawk from fearful sights. Like us.

Another hinge untied. Concentration. Infinite caution. Daylight irrigating the box. Scratching talons, another thump. And another. *Thump*. The air turned syrupy, slow, flecked with dust. The last few seconds before a battle. And with the last bow pulled free, he reached inside, and amidst a whirring, chaotic clatter of wings and feet and talons and a high-pitched twittering and it's all happening at once, the man pulls an enormous, *enormous* hawk out of the box and in a strange coincidence of world and deed a great flood of sunlight drenches us and everything is brilliance and fury. The hawk's wings, barred and beating, the sharp fingers of her dark-tipped primaries cutting the air, her feathers raised like the scattered quills of a fretful porpentine. Two enormous eyes. My heart jumps sideways. She is a conjuring trick. A reptile. A fallen angel. A griffon from the pages of an illuminated bestiary. Something bright and distant, like gold falling through water. A broken marionette of wings, legs and light-splashed feathers. She is wearing jesses, and the man holds them. For one awful, long moment she is hanging head-downward, wings open, like a turkey in a butcher's shop, only her head is turned right-way-up and she is seeing more than she has ever seen before in her whole short life. Her world was an aviary

no larger than a living room. Then it was a box. But now it is this; and she can see *everything:* the point-source glitter on the waves, a diving cormorant a hundred yards out; pigment flakes under wax on the lines of parked cars; far hills and the heather on them and miles and miles of sky where the sun spreads on dust and water and illegible things moving in it that are white scraps of gulls. Everything startling and new-stamped on her entirely astonished brain.

Through all this the man was perfectly calm. He gathered up the hawk in one practised movement, folding her wings, anchoring her broad feathered back against his chest, gripping her scaled yellow legs in one hand. 'Let's get that hood back on,' he said tautly. There was concern in his face. It was born of care. This hawk had been hatched in an incubator, had broken from a frail bluish eggshell into a humid perspex box, and for the first few days of her life this man had fed her with scraps of meat held in a pair of tweezers, waiting patiently for the lumpen, fluffy chick to notice the food and eat, her new neck wobbling with the effort of keeping her head in the air. All at once I loved this man, and fiercely. I grabbed the hood from the box and turned to the hawk. Her beak was open, her hackles raised; her wild eyes were the colour of sun on white paper, and they stared because the whole world had fallen into them at once. *One, two, three.* I tucked the hood over her head. There was a brief intimation of a thin, angular skull under her feathers, of an alien brain fizzing and fusing with terror, then I drew the braces closed. We checked the ring numbers against the form.

It was the wrong bird. This was the younger one. The smaller one. This was not my hawk.

Oh.

So we put her back and opened the other box, which was meant to hold the larger, older bird. And dear God, it did. Everything about this second hawk was different. She came out like a Victorian melodrama: a sort of madwoman in the

attack. She was smokier and darker and much, much bigger, and instead of twittering, she wailed; great, awful gouts of sound like a thing in pain, and the sound was unbearable. *This is my hawk*, I was telling myself and it was all I could do to breathe. She too was bareheaded, and I grabbed the hood from the box as before. But as I brought it up to her face I looked into her eyes and saw something blank and crazy in her stare. Some madness from a distant country. I didn't recognise her. *This isn't my hawk.* The hood was on, the ring numbers checked, the bird back in the box, the yellow form folded, the money exchanged, and all I could think was, *But this isn't my hawk.* Slow panic. I knew what I had to say, and it was a monstrous breach of etiquette. 'This is really awkward,' I began. 'But I really liked the first one. Do you think there's any chance I could take that one instead . . . ?' I tailed off. His eyebrows were raised. I started again, saying stupider things: 'I'm sure the other falconer would like the larger bird? She's more beautiful than the first one, isn't she? I know this is out of order, but I . . . Could I? Would it be all right, do you think?' And on and on, a desperate, crazy barrage of incoherent appeals.

I'm sure nothing I said persuaded him more than the look on my face as I said it. A tall, white-faced woman with wind-wrecked hair and exhausted eyes was pleading with him on a quayside, hands held out as if she were in a seaside production of *Medea.* Looking at me he must have sensed that my stuttered request wasn't a simple one. That there was something behind it that was very important. There was a moment of total silence.

'All right,' he said. And then, because he didn't see me believe him, 'Yes. Yes, I'm sure that'll be OK.'

6

The box of stars

'Hiding to nothing!' my old friend Martin Jones had said, and he'd raised both hands in the air in a gesture half of supplication, half exasperation. 'It's like banging your head against a wall. Don't do it. It'll drive you mad.' I kept thinking of what he'd said as I drove. Clutch, into fourth gear. Roundabout. Change down. Fierce acceleration. Slight resentment. I didn't want to think of all the things the men had told me. 'It'll drive you mad. Leave goshawks to the goshawk boys. Get something more sensible.'

I knew training this hawk would be hard. Goshawks are famously difficult to tame. To *man*, in falconry parlance. You can man a merlin in a few days. I once flew a Harris Hawk free after four. But gosses are nervous, highly-strung birds and it takes a long time to convince them you're not the enemy. Nervousness, of course, isn't quite the right word: it's simply that they have jacked-up nervous systems in which nerve pathways from the eyes and ears to the motor neurons that control their muscles have only minor links with associated neurons in the brain. Goshawks are nervous because they live life ten times faster than we do, and they react to stimuli literally without thinking. 'Of all Hawks,' wrote seventeenth-century falconer Richard Blome, 'she is doubtless the most Shie and Coy both towards the Men and Dogs, requiring more the Courtship of a Mistress than the Authority of a Master, being apt to remember any unkind

and rough usage; but being gently handled, will become very tractable, and kind to her keeper.' Well, kindness it would be, and kindness we shall hope for.

Kindness and love. I remember thinking idly as I drove about that fierce burst of love I'd felt on the quayside for a man who held a bird terrified by a world it couldn't comprehend. It took me miles of gentle puzzling before I worked out that the love was about my father and me. For weeks after he died, I'd sat in front of the television watching the British television drama *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* over and over again; hours of grainy 1970s 16mm cinefilm, soft and black on an old VHS tape. I'd curled up mentally in its dark interiors, its Whitehall offices and gentlemen's clubs. It was a story of espionage and betrayal that fitted together like a watch, and it was glacially slow and beautiful. But it was also a story about a boy called Jumbo, a boarder at a second-rate prep school in the Quantock Hills. Jumbo was one of life's losers. Plump, short-sighted, asthmatic, he suffered from a terrible sense of uselessness and all the guilt of a broken home. When a new French master arrived – a hunchbacked, piratical chap called Prideaux – Jumbo took him as an ally. Someone who understood. 'You're a good watcher,' Prideaux said. 'I'll tell you that for nothing, old boy. Us singles always are.' What Jumbo didn't know, couldn't know, was that Prideaux had been a spy, and Prideaux' hurt back was a Russian bullet, and that there were other hurts, too, for Prideaux had been betrayed by his friend and former lover. Jumbo's world was too small to encompass such things, but he sensed that his teacher had lost some great friend all the same, and took it upon himself to stand in for that friend until he returned. He had found a use for himself. Watching the video I loved Prideaux, and his prep-school landscape – with hills buried in mist and rooks querulous in elms, rugger matches and white breath from the mouths of boys on fields on winter mornings – became the setting for a whole series of grief-spurred dreams that spring.

What happens to the mind after bereavement makes no sense until later. Even as I watched I'd half-realised Prideaux was a figure I'd picked out for a father. But what I should have realised, too, on those northern roads, is that what the mind does after losing one's father isn't just to pick new fathers from the world, but pick new selves to love them with. Back in those first few weeks, small and desperate, I'd chosen to be Jumbo. And on that Scottish quayside, just for a moment, without knowing why, I'd chosen to be the hawk. And I drove and drove, and the roads slipped by and the sky annealed into slews of the hardest white and blue.

I started to fret. The box was far too quiet. I pulled gloomily into the next motorway services. Christina ran off to buy ice-cream and I squinted into one of the airholes punched in the box's cardboard sides. After hours of top-lit tarmac my vision was in ruins. I couldn't see anything at all, and I didn't really want to, because of course the hawk was dead. And then, all at once, *my God*, the box was full of stars.

A long time ago I'd seen a suitcase in an art gallery, a small brown leather suitcase lying on its side on a white table. It was the most mundane object imaginable, and faintly sad, as if someone had put it down on their way somewhere and forgotten to pick it up. The artist had cut a small round hole through the leather. *Look inside*, said a pasted label, and with the faint embarrassment of being required to participate in a work of art, I leaned and put my eye to the hole. Started in surprise. Looked again. And there I was, a king of infinite space, dizzy, exhilarated, looking into a deep starfield that stretched into infinity. It was cleverly done; the artist had stuck two acid-spotted mirrors to the top and bottom of the case and lit them with a parade of tiny bulbs. The reflections of the spots and holes in the glass and the bright points of light turned the interior of that suitcase into a bright, cold universe that went on for ever.

Crouched over the car's back seat and lost in the memory of the suitcase I stared at a field of stars in darkness. Slowly it resolved into specks of feather-dust, little pieces of the crumbled keratin that protects growing feathers, loosed from the hawk's young plumage and lit by a shaft of stray sunlight from a crack in the top of the box. Eyes and brain fell into place, and now I could see a dull shine of half-light on one lemon-yellow, taloned foot. Dim feathers, shivering with apprehension. The hawk knew she was being watched. I shivered too. 'She's OK?' asked Christina, back and biting into a Solero. 'Fine,' I said. 'Absolutely fine.' Engine on. We pulled away. Hawks have been traded for centuries, I chided myself. Of *course* she was alive. Seven hours is nothing. Think of the seventeenth-century falcon traders who brought wild hawks to the French court from as far away as India. Think of the Fifth Earl of Bedford importing falcons from Nova Scotia and New England; rows of perched hawks in wooden ships, hooded and still, and the lowing of cattle that were carried as cargo on those ships to feed them. And as we drove onward, I thought of White's goshawk, of how much worse its journey had been than this: first from its nest to a German falconer; then by aeroplane to England, then by train from Croydon to a falconer called Nesbitt in Shropshire; then to a different falconer in Scotland as part of a swap that didn't seem to come off, for the hawk was returned to Nesbitt. A few days' reprieve in an airy loft, and it was back on a train, this time to Buckingham, a small, red-brick market town five miles from Stowe. And that is where White picked it up. How many miles? I reckon that's about fifteen hundred or so, over many days. I'm not altogether sure how the hawk survived.

Small souls, sent far from safety. In the opening pages of *The Goshawk*, White describes the awful journey of his fledgling hawk: torn from its nest, stuffed in a basket, and sent to a

strange land to receive an education. He asks us to imagine what it was like, to put ourselves in the hawk's bewildered, infant mind; to experience the heat and noise, confusion and terror that was its journey to his door. 'It must have been like death,' he wrote, 'the thing which we can never know beforehand.'

What we see in the lives of animals are lessons we've learned from the world. A while ago, in a yellow tin chest in a college library, I found some photographs of White as a toddler. They're silvered prints of a dusty Karachi landscape; a jandi tree, long shadows, a clear sky. In the first the boy sits on a donkey looking at the camera. He wears a loose shalwar kameez and a child's sun hat, and his small round face has no interest in the donkey except for the fact that he is sitting on it. His mother stands behind him in impeccable Edwardian whites, looking beautiful and bored. In the second photograph the boy runs towards the camera over parched earth. He is running as fast as he can: his stubby arms are blurred as they swing, and the expression on his face, half-terror, half-delight, is something I've never seen on any other child. It is triumph that he has ridden the donkey, but relief that it is over. It is a face in desperate need of safety, with certain knowledge that there is none.

There was none. His parents' marriage was ill-starred from the first. Constance Aston had been nearly thirty when her mother's jibes about the cost of keeping her became unbearable. 'I'll marry the next man who asks me,' she snapped. The man was Garrick White, a District Commissioner of Police in Bombay. The newly-weds travelled to India, and as soon as Terence was born, Constance refused to sleep with her husband any more. He took to drink and the marriage toppled into violence. Five years later, the family came back to England to live for a while with Constance's parents in the south-coast resort of St Leonards-on-Sea. When they returned to India they left the boy behind. It was an abandonment, but

it was also a reprieve from fear. *All that time was too beautiful for these words*, was how White described his St Leonards life in a faintly fictionalised autobiographical fragment that in places breaks into his own, childish voice, the voice of a small boy desperate for attention and already desirous of transformation into other, safer selves: *Look at me, Ruth, I am a pirate chief! Look, I am an aeroplane! Look, I am a polar bear! Look! Look! Look!* There were puss-moth caterpillars, a tortoise, a storeroom with chocolate and sugar in jars, and endless games with his cousins.

But it could not go on for ever. 'They took us away from that life,' he wrote, shortly, 'and sent us to schools.' The idyll was over, the child pitched back into a life of fear and violence. His Cheltenham housemaster was a 'sadistic middle-aged bachelor with a gloomy suffused face' and the prefects were his acolytes. They used to beat the younger boys after evening prayers. Every day the boy prayed, 'Please, God, don't let me be beaten tonight.' He usually was. 'I knew in a dumb way it was a sexual outrage,' he later mused, 'though I could not have phrased that charge.' No wonder he felt so deeply for the hawk. The boy had been torn from the only place he'd ever felt was home and sent away to be educated in a world of exacting bureaucratic cruelty. It was a betrayal that marked White for ever. And it would also mark his hawk.

Ferox. Fairy. Free. Tim White sits at his kitchen table and fills his fountain pen from a bottle of green ink that stands on the oilskin tablecloth. The ink is a mischievous thing, a small, fierce thing. He is writing of his new life with a colour that is the ink of – what does Havelock Ellis call it? The favourite ink of inverts. The hawk arrives tomorrow. Soon there will be three souls in the house: himself, his dog, his hawk. The thought thrills him. He loves this house. He calls it his workman's cottage, his badger's sett, his refuge. Outside, light and leaf-shadows move on the high grey gables. It is not a grand

house – the water comes from a well and there is an earth-closet in the garden – but he thinks it is a beautiful one. And yes, it is rented, costs him five shillings a week, but it is the first time he has ever lived in a place of his own. He is making it his. He's varnished the ceilings, painted everything bright. Red glossy paint. Blue Robiallac. On the mantelpiece, birds' wings. A spill-jar. Patterned wallpaper. A mirror. Books everywhere. He's spent £66 on deep-pile carpets, bought a winged brocade armchair and laid in a stock of Madeira. Upstairs he's transformed the guest bedroom into a fairy-tale room of secret, romantic exuberance: mirrors and gilt, blue bed-linen and a golden bedspread, surrounded by candles. Still, he can't bring himself to sleep in it. The camp bed in the other room with the brown curtains will suffice. And the hawk will live in the barn outside, and they will both call this place home.

The Victorian terrace loomed and swayed in the summer dusk. I walked to my door, box in my arms. I don't remember opening the box that night. What I remember is my bare feet treading on carpet and the weight of the hawk on my fist. Her shape, long and haunted, and the hitch of her nervous shoulders as she stepped backwards onto the shadow of the bowperch on my living-room floor. I remember thinking of the passage in *The Sword in the Stone* where a falconer took a goshawk back onto his own fist, 'reassuming him like a lame man putting on his accustomed wooden leg, after it had been lost'. Yes, holding the hawk for the first time felt like that. Exactly like that. Mutely I crawled up the stairs and fell into bed. The hawk was here, the journey was over.

That night I dreamed of my father. It wasn't the usual dream of a family reunited. In the dream I'm searching for something in a house, an empty house with pale squares on the walls where pictures should be. I can't find what I am looking for. I open an upstairs door onto a room that is not

like the others. Three white walls run with water and the far wall is gone. No wall at all: just air, falling into the pale violet of a city evening. Below me is a bombsite. Tons of bricks and rubble, rosebay willowherb blooming in drifts between broken rafters and spars that are ruined chairs and the shadows between all these things are thickening to night. But they are not what I am looking at. Because standing on top of the tallest pile of bricks is a small boy with sandy hair. His face is turned away, but I recognise him immediately, and not just because he's wearing the same short trousers and lumpy grey jacket in a photograph in our family album. It is my father.

As soon as I see him I know where I am. This is Shepherd's Bush, where he'd run wild as a boy, clambering over bombsites with his friends, collecting things, salvaging them, hiding, watching. 'We used to bomb bricks with bombs made of bricks,' he'd told me once. 'There wasn't much else to play with.' And then the boy turns, looks up at me standing in the ruined house, and I know he is going to say something. But there are no words. Instead, he points with one arm. Points *up*. I look. There's an aeroplane up there, thousands of feet above us, so high its fuselage and wings are still lit by the setting sun. There's no engine noise, no sound, nothing moving anywhere else. Just this small point of light crossing the sky until it passes over and is lost in the shadow of the world. And I look down again, and the boy that was my father is gone.

7
Invisibility

Prrt. Prrt. Prrt. One interrogatory note over and over again, like a telephone call from a bird deep in leaves. That's what pulled me from sleep. The noise came from a chaffinch in the lime tree outside my window, and I lay watching the day grow bright listening to the sound move about in the tree behind the glass. It was a *rain call*, a beautiful name for a noise like an unanswered question. No one knows why chaffinches make it, but the name comes from an old tradition that it portends bad weather.

In the 1950s, in a small research station in Madingley a few miles north of where I lay, a scientist called Thorpe experimented on chaffinches to try to understand how they learned to sing. He reared young finches in total isolation in soundproofed cages, and listened, fascinated, to the rudimentary songs his broken birds produced. There was a short window of time, he found, in which the isolated chicks needed to hear the elaborate trills of adult song, and if that window was missed, they could never quite manage to produce it themselves. He tried exposing his isolated fledglings to looped tapes of the songs of other species: could they be persuaded to sing like tree pipits? It was a groundbreaking piece of research into developmental learning, but it was also a science soaked deep in Cold War anxieties. The questions Thorpe was asking were those of a post-war West obsessed with identity and frightened of brainwashing. How do you

learn who you are? Can your allegiances be changed? Can you be trusted? What makes you a chaffinch? Where do you come from? Thorpe discovered that wild chaffinches from different places had different dialects. I listened carefully to the bird outside. Yes, its song was different from the song of Surrey chaffinches I'd learned as a child. It was thinner, less complicated; seemed to cut off before it was properly finished. I thought I would like to hear Surrey chaffinches again. I thought of sad birds in soundproofed cages, and how your earliest experiences teach you who you are. I thought of the house from my dream. I thought of home. And then, with a slow, luxuriant thrill, I realised that everything was different about the house I was in. It was the hawk. I shut my eyes. The hawk had filled the house with wildness as a bowl of lilies fills a house with scent. It was about to begin.

In the half-light through the drawn curtains she sits on her perch, relaxed, hooded, extraordinary. Formidable talons, wicked, curved black beak, sleek, *café-au-lait* front streaked thickly with cocoa-coloured teardrops, looking for all the world like some cappuccino samurai. 'Hello hawk,' I whisper, and at the sound she draws her feathers tight in alarm. 'Hush,' I tell myself, and the hawk. *Hush*. Then I put on my falconer's glove, step forward and take her up onto my fist, untying the falconer's knot that secures her leash to the perch.

She bates. *Bating*. A 'headlong dive of rage and terror, by which a leashed hawk leaps from the fist in a wild bid for freedom'. That's how White described it in *The Goshawk*. The falconer's duty, he explained, 'is to lift the hawk back to the fist with his other hand in gentleness and patience'. I lift her back onto my fist with gentleness and patience. Her feet grip the glove convulsively. *This perch is moving*. I feel her mind grappling with novelty. *But still it is the only thing I understand. I shall hold it tight*. I persuade her to step onto a perch on a modified set of scales. Hawks have a flying weight,

just as boxers have a fighting weight. A hawk that's too fat, or *high*, has little interest in flying, and won't return to the falconer's call. Hawks too low are awful things: spare, unhappy, lacking the energy to fly with fire and style. Taking the hawk back onto my fist I feel for her breastbone with the bare fingers of my other hand. She is plump, her skin hot under her feathers, and through my fingertips I feel the beating of her nervous heart. I shiver. Draw my hand back. Superstition. I can't bear to feel that flickering sign of life, can't help but suspect that my attention might somehow make it stop.

In the front room I sit, tuck a piece of raw steak into the glove under her scaly feet, and wait. One minute, two. Three. And I take the hood from her head.

Two wide, wild eyes stare at me for a fraction of a second, and then they are gone. Before the hawk can work out what the hell is happening she is trying to fly away as fast as possible. Brought up short by her jesses she twitters in high-pitched distress as the realisation of her hateful circumstances strikes. She can't get away. I lift her back onto the glove. Under her feathers is sinew, and bone, and that fast-beating heart. She bates again. And again. I *hate* this. In these first few minutes there's nothing you can do but accept that you are terrifying the hawk when it is the very opposite of everything you desire. After three more bates my heart is beating like a fitting beast, but she's back on the glove, beak open, eyes blazing. And then there is a long moment of extraordinary intensity.

The goshawk is staring at me in mortal terror, and I can feel the silences between both our heartbeats coincide. Her eyes are luminous, silver in the gloom. Her beak is open. She breathes hot hawk breath in my face. It smells of pepper and musk and burned stone. Her feathers are half-raised and her wings half-open, and her scaled yellow toes and curved black talons grip the glove tightly. It feels like I'm holding a flaming torch. I can feel the heat of her fear on my face. She stares. She stares and stares. Seconds slow and tick past. Her

wings are dropped low; she crouches, ready for flight. I don't look at her. I mustn't. What I am doing is concentrating very hard on the process of *not being there.*

Here's one thing I know from years of training hawks: one of the things you must learn to do is become invisible. It's what you do when a fresh hawk sits on your left fist with food beneath her feet, in a state of savage, defensive fear. Hawks aren't social animals like dogs or horses; they understand neither coercion nor punishment. The only way to tame them is through positive reinforcement with gifts of food. You want the hawk to eat the food you hold – it's the first step in reclaiming her that will end with you being hunting partners. But the space between the fear and the food is a vast, vast gulf, and you have to cross it together. I thought, once, that you did it by being infinitely patient. But no: it is more than that. You must become invisible. Imagine: you're in a darkened room. You are sitting with a hawk on your fist. She is as immobile, as tense and sprung as a catapult at full stretch. Underneath her huge, thorny feet is a chunk of raw steak. You're trying to get her to look at the steak, not at you, because you know – though you haven't looked – that her eyes are fixed in horror at your profile. All you can hear is the wet *click, click, click* of her blinking.

To cross this space between fear and food, and to somehow make possible an eventual concord between your currently paralysed, immobile minds, you need – very urgently – not to be there. You empty your mind and become very still. You think of exactly nothing at all. The hawk becomes a strange, hollow concept, as flat as a snapshot or a schematic drawing, but at the same time, as pertinent to your future as an angry high court judge. Your gloved fist squeezes the meat a fraction, and you feel the tiny imbalance of weight and you see out of the very corner of your vision that she's looked down at it. And so, remaining invisible, you make the food the only thing in the room apart from the hawk; you're

not there at all. And what you hope is that she'll start eating, and you can very, very slowly make yourself visible. Even if you don't move a muscle, and just relax into a more normal frame of mind, the hawk *knows*. It's extraordinary. It takes a long time to be yourself, in the presence of a new hawk.

But I didn't have to learn how to do this. I was already an expert. It was a trick I'd learned early in my life; a small, slightly fearful girl, obsessed with birds, who loved to disappear. Like Jumbo in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy,* I was a watcher. I had always been a watcher. When I was a child I'd climb the hill behind my house and crawl into my favourite den under a rhododendron bush, wriggling down on my tummy under overhanging leaves like a tiny sniper. And in this secret foxhole, nose an inch from the ground, breathing crushed bracken and acid soil, I'd look down on the world below, basking in the fierce calm that comes from being invisible but seeing everything. Watching, not doing. Seeking safety in not being seen. It's a habit you can fall into, willing yourself into invisibility. And it doesn't serve you well in life. Believe me it doesn't. Not with people and loves and hearts and homes and work. But for the first few days with a new hawk, making yourself disappear is the greatest skill in the world.

The confidence with which I sat there with the hawk was absolute. *I know how to do this*, I thought. *I am good, at least, at this. I know all the steps to this dance.* First the hawk will feed on my gloved fist. Then as the days pass she'll grow tamer, partly because I am keeping her indoors and constantly in my presence, just as fifteenth-century falconers had done. Soon she will step to my fist for food, and later she will jump to it. We'll go for long walks to accustom her to cars and dogs and people. And then she'll fly to me when I call her, first on a line, the creance, and then free. And then.

And then. I'd instructed my friends to leave me alone. I'd filled the freezer with hawk food and unplugged the phone.

Now I was a hermit with a hawk in a darkened room with books on three walls, a faded Afghan rug, and a sofa of stained yellow velvet. A mirror hung over the boarded-up fireplace, and a Shell poster from the 1930s on the wall above me was reflected backwards and watery in the old glass. YOU CAN BE SURE OF SHELL, it said, along with a scumble of stormclouds and a part of the Dorset coast. There was an old television, a mint-green vinyl cloth on the floor with the hawk's perch on it, and a pair of deep green curtains printed with flowers that shut out the world. The goal was to be motionless, the mind empty, the heart full of hope. But as the minutes stretched I had to move, just slightly: angle my foot to stop it sleeping; wrinkle my nose if it itched, and each time I did so I felt the hawk flinch in fear. But I also saw from the corner of my eye that she was pulling herself up incrementally from that sprung-to-fly crouch. Her stance was more upright. There was a little less fear in the room.

The old falconers called the manning of a hawk like this *watching*. It was a reassuringly familiar state of mind, meditative and careful and grave. For the first time in months my life had a purpose. I was waiting for the moment from which all else follows: the hawk lowering her head and beginning to feed. That was all I wanted. That was all there was. Waiting. Watching. Sitting with the hawk felt as if I were holding my breath for hours with no effort. No rise, no fall, just my heart beating and I could feel it, in my fingertips, that little clipping throb of blood that – because it was the only thing I could sense moving – didn't feel part of myself at all. As if it was another person's heart, or something else living inside me. Something with a flat, reptilian head, two heavy, down-dropped wings. Shadowed, thrush-streaked sides. There was a greenish cast to the light in the room, dark and cool and faintly submarine. Outside life went on, hot and distant. Shadows passed behind the curtains that were shoppers and students and bicycles and dogs. Vague, person-shaped shades

making sounds like tin-can telephones, burred and incomprehensible. The *slap, slap* of walking feet. The hissing buzz of another bicycle. Long minutes passed. A piece of down dislodged from the hawk's covert-feathers drifted slowly to the carpet at my feet. A tiny star, barely any quill to it, just a muss of soft white plumes. I looked at it for a long time. I'd not looked at an object like this, with such searching attention with my mind elsewhere, since that reindeer moss, on the day the phone call came.

White-knuckle jobs, Dad used to call them: it was Fleet Street slang for the dangerous assignments. Leaning out of a helicopter with a camera in one hand and the other gripping the door-frame because the safety harness had snapped. Or looking through a fish-eye lens from the top of Salisbury Cathedral, standing on a frail iron rung hammered into stone four hundred feet in the sky. 'White-knuckle jobs? I get through them by looking through the camera,' he said. 'I bring it up like this' – and he mimed holding it to his eye. 'Look through the viewfinder. Stops you being involved. Stops you being scared.' You no longer possess a body to fall or fail: all that exists is a square of finely ground glass and the world seen through it, and a whole mass of technical decisions in your head about exposure and depth of field and getting the shot you hope for.

Sitting there with the hawk in that darkened room I felt safer than I'd done for months. Partly because I had a purpose. But also because I'd closed the door on the world outside. Now I could think of my father. I began to consider how he had coped with difficulty. Putting a lens between himself and the world was a defence against more than physical danger: it shielded him from other things he had to photograph: awful things, tragic things; accidents, train crashes, the aftermath of city bombs. He'd worried that this survival strategy had become a habit. 'I see the world through

a lens,' he said once, a little sadly, as if the camera were always there, stopping him getting involved, something between him and the life that other people had.

The chaffinch was calling again. *How you learn what you are*. Had I learned to be a watcher from my father? Was it a kind of childhood mimicking of his professional strategy for dealing with difficulty? I kicked the thought around for a while, and then I kicked it away. *No*, I thought. *No*. It was more *I can't think that* than *It's not true*. All those thousands upon thousands of photographs my father had taken. Think of them instead. Each one a record, a testament, a bulwark against forgetting, against nothingness, against death. Look, *this happened*. A thing happened, and now it will never unhappen. Here it is, in the photograph: a baby putting its tiny hand in the wrinkled palm of an octogenarian. A fox running across a woodland path and a man raising a gun to shoot it. A car wreck. A plane crash. A comet smeared across the morning sky. A prime minister wiping his brow. The Beatles, sitting at a café table on the Champs-Elysées on a cold January day in 1964, John Lennon's pale face under the brim of his fisherman's cap. All these things had happened, and my father had committed them to a memory that wasn't just his own, but the world's. My father's life wasn't about disappearance. His was a life that worked against it.

He'd come home from work strangely disheartened one winter evening. We asked him what was wrong. 'Did you see the sky today?' he said. He'd been walking through a London park on his way back from a press-call. It was deserted but for a small boy playing by a frozen boating lake. 'I said, "Look up, look at that. Remember you saw that. You'll never see it again."' Above them both was a vast tracery of ice-rings and sun-dogs in a wintry, hazy sky. A 22° halo, a circumzenithal arc and an upper tangent arc, the sun's light refracting and cutting the heavens into a complicated geometry of ice and air and fire. But the boy didn't seem interested

at all. Dad was baffled. 'Maybe he thought you were one of those strange men,' we sniggered, rolling our eyes, and he looked embarrassed and faintly cross. But he was so very sad about the boy who didn't see.

Now that Dad was gone I was starting to see how mortality was bound up in things like that cold, arc-lit sky. How the world is full of signs and wonders that come, and go, and if you are lucky you might see them. Once, twice. Perhaps never again. The albums on my mother's shelves are full of family photographs. But also other things. A starling with a crooked beak. A day of hoarfrost and smoke. A cherry tree thick with blossom. Thunderclouds, lightning strikes, comets and eclipses: celestial events terrifying in their blind distances but reassuring you, too, that the world is for ever, though you are only a blink in its course.

Henri Cartier-Bresson called the taking of a good photograph a *decisive moment*. 'Your eye must see a composition or an expression that life itself offers you, and you must know with intuition when to click the camera,' he said. 'The Moment! Once you miss it, it is gone for ever.' I thought of one of these moments as I sat there waiting for the hawk to eat from my hand. It was a black-and-white photograph my father had taken many years ago of an elderly street-cleaner with a white goatee beard, wrinkled socks and down-at-heel shoes. Crumpled work trousers, work gloves, a woollen beret. The camera is low, on the pavement: Dad must have crouched in the road to take it. The man is bending down, his besom of birch twigs propped against his side. He has taken off one of his gloves, and between the thumb and first finger of his bare right hand he is offering a crumb of bread to a sparrow on the kerbstone. The sparrow is caught mid-hop at exactly at the moment it takes the crumb from his fingers. And the expression on the man's face is suffused with joy. He is wearing the face of an angel.

* * *

Time passed. Hawks gorge themselves in the wild and can spend days without food. I knew the hawk would not eat from my hand today. She was scared, she wasn't hungry; the world was an insult. Both of us needed a break. I popped the hood back over her head. *There.* Fleeting panic, nerves afire, and then she relaxed because the day had turned to night and I had disappeared. The terror had gone. *Hoodwinked.* It was an ancient piece of trickery and an excusable one: the darkness would give her space to set her frayed nerves to rights. As would it mine. On her perch, she slept. I slept too, wrapped in a duvet dragged over the sofa. Later, when I picked her up again, the mood in the room had changed. She had done this before; was no longer entirely certain I was a monster. She bated, once, towards the floor, but it was a bate to the floor, not away from me in blind terror. I lifted her back onto the glove. We sat some more. Then, instead of fixing her gaze on me in horror, she began to examine her surroundings. New things. Shelves, walls, floor: she inspected them all carefully with small, sideways movements of her head. Hawk parallax, judging perfect distances. She observed the ceiling as far as it would go, the lines of the bookshelves beneath it, cocked her head to consider the strip of messy tassels along the edge of the rug. Then came a decisive moment. It was not the one I was hoping for, but it was thrilling all the same. Regarding the room with simple curiosity, she turned her head and saw me. And jumped. Jumped exactly like a human in surprise. I felt the scratch of her talons and her shock, too, cold and electric. That was the moment. Until a minute ago I was so terrifying I was all that existed. But then she had forgotten me. Only for a fraction of a second, but it was enough. The forgetting was delightful because it was a sign that the hawk was starting to accept me. But there was a deeper, darker thrill. It was that I had been forgotten.

8

The Rembrandt interior

White loosed his young male goshawk in the barn that first night and in the early hours, at five minutes past three, it stepped onto his fist and fed. It was hungry, familiar with humans, willing already to come to the falconer for food. It was a state that my hawk had not yet reached and would not reach for days. If White had only known what he was doing, Gos could have been flying free in a week. But he didn't know what he was doing. He didn't understand that a hawk in training must be kept a little hungry, for only through gifts of food will a wild bird begin to see you as a benevolent figure and not an affront to all existence.

White was petrified. On his hawk's tail were strange pale transverse stripes, as if someone had drawn a razor blade across the quills. He knew what they were: hunger-traces caused by lack of food as the feathers grew; weaknesses that made them liable to break. Guilt and blame. He worried that it was his fault the hawk was damaged. He wanted to stop these hunger-traces, make up for whatever early lack had scarred his hawk and made its feathers weak. So he fed it. He fed it as much as he possibly could. He didn't know that because those feathers were now full-grown there was no danger of making the traces worse. He gave the hawk so much food that the hawk couldn't eat it, bear the sight of it, and here is White, the terrified austringer, stroking the hawk's breast-feathers with a split rabbit skull showing all

the rabbit's spilled brains in desperate attempts to get it to eat, when the hawk doesn't want to eat because it is full. *Love me*, he is saying. *Please. I can make it up to you, make it better. Fix you. Please eat.* But a fat, stuffed goshawk doesn't want anything other than to be left alone, to disappear into that half-world of no-humans, replete and contented, eyes half-closed, one foot tucked up into soft feathers, to digest its food and sleep. Over the coming days and weeks, White tries different food, better food, trying to tempt the hawk to eat more that it can bear. He is wheedling, desperate, certain that his patience will triumph. And of course at some point the hawk becomes half-hungry enough to eat, and White stuffs it with food, convinced that all will now be well. And then the hawk hates him, and the strange cycle begins again. 'Days of attack and counter-attack,' was how White described it; 'a kind of sweeping to and fro across disputed battle fields.' There is a nightmarish logic to White's time with the hawk: the logic of a sadist who half-hates his hawk because he hates himself, who wants to hurt it because he loves it, but will not, and insists that it eats so that it will love him. And these twisted logics were met with the simple logic of a wild, fat goshawk that considers this man the most inimical thing on earth.

'I had only just escaped from humanity,' White wrote, 'and the poor gos had only just been caught by it.' But he hadn't escaped, not quite. When you read *The Goshawk* you're given to understand that his cottage was miles from anywhere, a remote outpost deep in a wood half a mile from the nearest road. But the cottage was on the Stowe estate; it had been built on one of the old roads laid out as carriage routes to the great house centuries before. They were called the Ridings, and one ran in a shifting river of grass straight past White's cottage, over the crest of a sheep-cropped hill and down to the doors of the school. The house was rustic, yes: it

had an earth-closet and a well, and when White stood with his hawk in the barn he could still see where a Victorian gamekeeper had written of vanished bags of game in pencil on the back of the door. *Phesant*, it said. *Harn*. But remote it was not. There was his house, not quite in a wood, sitting on the old and open road to Stowe, like a promise not quite kept, and White in it, like a dog who sits at the very end of his chain, or the sad divorcee who moves out of their partner's house to live at the bottom of the road. For all his joy in freedom, the schoolmaster had not escaped the bounds of the school, and he'd not escaped schoolmastering either.

In Blaine's book White read that falconry was the art of control over the wildest and proudest of living creatures, and that to train them the falconer must battle their defiance and rebellious attitude. The training of a hawk mirrored the education of the public schoolboy. In both, a wild and unruly subject was shaped and moulded, made civilised; was taught good manners and obedience. But the methods were different, and this gave White much pleasure. 'I had been a schoolmaster for so long,' he wrote, 'in which profession the standard way of meeting a difficult situation was by punishment. It was nice after this to discover a profession of education where punishment was treated as ridiculous.'

It was the perfect kind of education, he decided, for him and for the hawk. He would call his book *The Austringer*, and in its pages he and his readers would take a 'patient excursion into the fields and back into the past'. That excursion wasn't just back into an imagined English past; it was also a journey back into his own. White had 'dropped out of the curious adult heterosexual competition', had become again 'a monastic boy'. In those long hours of psychoanalysis with Bennet, White had learned that going back in time was a way of fixing things; uncovering past traumas, revisiting them and defusing their power. Now he was going back in time with the hawk. He'd already empathised with the fledgling in the

basket, had seen the hawk as himself. Now he was unconsciously re-enacting his childhood – with the hawk standing in for himself as a boy, and the grown-up White playing the role of an enlightened teacher who could not, would not, must not beat or hurt the child in his care.

He considers falconry the most glorious of mysteries. He has no one to teach him and two books to learn from, not counting the description in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* which he has almost by heart. There is Blaine's *Falconry*, published the previous year, and *Coursing and Falconry* by Gerald Lascelles, from 1892. But the book White cleaves to is much older; it was published in 1619. Called *An Approved Treatise of Hawkes and Hawking*, it is all about goshawks, and it was written by Edmund Bert, Gentleman. White didn't yet possess a copy of his own, for it was a rare volume; but he'd read it. Perhaps he'd read the copy kept at the Cambridge University Library. Perhaps it was the very same copy I'd pored over as a student. As White was seduced by Bert's book, so was I. It is bloody marvellous. Bert is the seventeenth-century counterpart of some of the blunter Yorkshire goshawkers of my acquaintance on whom something of the hawk's character has rubbed off. Accomplished, cantankerous, with a bracing wit, he never fails to arrogate himself, tell us how perfectly his hawks behave: craning on tiptoe to pick marrow from his fingertips, they are happy to travel with him wherever he goes. When away from home, Bert boasts, he'd put his hawk on 'a velvet stoole, in a dining-chamber or parlour, as the place was whereunto I went, for I would have my Hawke as much in my eye as could be. Perhaps I should see the Lady or Mistress of the house look discontentedly thereat,' he deadpans, 'but so well have I been acquainted with my hawk's good disposition that I have promised if my hawk should make a mute in the room, I would lick it up with my tongue.'

Edmund Bert haunted White as he trained his hawk, just as White haunted me. But it was a different kind of haunting. 'I had a sort of schoolgirlish "pash" for that serious old man who lived three hundred years ago,' he privately confessed. He wanted to impress Bert. He was in love with him. Dizzied by medievalist imaginings, in love with a falconer three hundred years dead, he had decided to ignore the teachings of Blaine, for the most part, and train his hawk the old-fashioned way.

> The old hawk masters had invented a means of taming them which offered no visible cruelty, and whose secret cruelty had to be born [sic] by the trainer as well as by the bird. They kept the bird awake. Not by nudging it or by any mechanical means, but by walking about with their pupil on their fist and staying awake themselves. The hawk was 'watched', was deprived of sleep by a sleepless man, for a space of two, three, or as much as nine nights together.

White wilfully misunderstood Bert's methods. The seventeenth-century austringer would have had any number of friends and attendants to take over while he slept. But White was desirous of a rite of passage. A proper knight's vigil. And he needed to do it alone, man against man, as it were. Watching his hawk would be a privation, an ordeal, a test of his Word. He would not be cruel. But he would conquer both the hawk and himself in one fell swoop. 'Man against bird,' he wrote, 'with God as an umpire, they had sat each other out for three thousand years.' In this long vigil – White had six hours' sleep in six days – the effects of extreme tiredness took their toll. Again and again, delirious from lack of sleep, sitting in the kitchen or standing in the lamplit barn, he lifted the fat and frightened hawk onto his fist, reciting it passages from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Richard II*, *Othello* – 'but the tragedy had to be kept out of the voice' – and all the sonnets he could remember, whistling hymns to it, playing it Gilbert and Sullivan and

Italian opera, and deciding, on reflection, that hawks liked Shakespeare best.

When I was a student I took a paper on Tragedy as part of my English degree. This was not without irony, for I was comprehensively tragic. I wore black, smoked filterless Camels, skulked about the place with kohl-caked eyes and failed to write a single essay about Greek Tragedy, Jacobean Tragedy, Shakespearian Tragedy, or indeed do much at all. *I'd like to write Miss Macdonald a glowing report*, one of my supervisors noted drily, *but as I've never seen her and have no idea what she looks like, this I cannot do*. But I read all the same. I read a lot. And I found there were myriad definitions of this thing called tragedy that had wormed its way through the history of literature; and the simplest of all was this: that it is the story of a figure who, through some moral flaw or personal failing, falls through force of circumstance to his doom.

It was the Tragedy paper that led me to read Freud, because he was still fashionable back then, and because psychoanalysts had their shot at explaining tragedy too. And after reading him I began to see all sorts of psychological transferences in my falconry books. I saw those nineteenth-century falconers were projecting onto their hawks all the male qualities they thought threatened by modern life: wildness, power, virility, independence and strength. By identifying with their hawks as they trained them, they could *introject*, or repossess, those qualities. At the same time they could exercise their power by 'civilising' a wild and primitive creature. Masculinity and conquest: two imperial myths for the price of one. The Victorian falconer assumed the power and strength of the hawk. The hawk assumed the manners of the man.

For White, too, falconry involved strange projections, but of very different qualities. His young German goshawk was a living expression of all the dark, discreditable desires within himself he'd tried to repress for years: it was a thing

fey, fairy, feral, ferocious and cruel. He had tried for so long to be a gentleman. Tried to fit in, to adhere to all the rules of civilised society, to be normal, to be like everyone else. But his years at Stowe and his analysis and the fear of war had brought him to breaking point. He had refused humanity in favour of hawks, but he could not escape himself. Once again White was engaged in a battle to civilise the perversity and unruliness within himself. Only now he had put those things in the hawk, and he was trying to civilise them there. He found himself in a strange, locked battle with a bird that was all the things he longed for, but had always fought against. It was a terrible paradox. A proper tragedy. No wonder living with Gos brought him nearly to madness.

He is lost. The barn is a dungeon. He is swimmingly, drunkenly tired. A chill summer wind blows through the walls. White owls hunt outside: powdery, reed-thin shrieks under a low orange moon. He is an executioner, he thinks, and he should be wearing a mask. A black one that conceals his face. He has been measuring time in the bates of the hawk, in the hundreds of times he's lifted the screaming captive back onto the glove. The barn is the Bastille. The hawk is a prisoner. The falconer is a man in riding breeches and a checked coat. He stands in a Rembrandt interior. A pile of sticks and empty jars on the brick floor; cobwebs on the walls. A broken grate. A barrel of Flowers beer. A pool of light from the oil-lamp, and the hawk. The hawk, the hawk, the hawk. It is on his fist, all the sepia arrowheads on its pale breast dishevelled and frayed from his hands. The man is swaying backwards and forwards like a man on a ship, as if the ground beneath him pitched and rolled like the sea. He is trying to stay awake. He is trying to keep the hawk awake. The hawk is trying to close its eyes and sleep but the swaying pulls it back. I am free, the man is telling himself. *Free.* He stares at the cobwebs behind the exhausted hawk. I am

in purdah, he thinks happily. I must not look the hawk in the eye. I must not punish the hawk, though it bates, and beats, and my hand is raw with pecks and my face stings from the blows of its bating wings. Hawks cannot be punished. They would rather die than submit. Patience is my only weapon. Patience. Derived from *patior*. Meaning *to suffer*. It is an ordeal. I shall triumph. He sways on his feet and suffers and the hawk suffers too. The owls are silent now. They quarter the Ridings over turf drenched with dew.

9

The rite of passage

The feathers down her front are the colour of sunned newsprint, of tea-stained paper, and each is marked darkly towards its tip with a leaf-bladed spearhead, so from her throat to her feet she is patterned with a shower of falling raindrops. Her wings are the colour of stained oak, their covert feathers edged in palest teak, barred flight-feathers folded quietly beneath. And there's a strange grey tint to her that is felt, rather than seen, a kind of silvery light like a rainy sky reflected from the surface of a river. She looks new. Looks as if the world cannot touch her. As if everything that exists and is observed rolls off like drops of water from her oiled and close-packed feathers. And the more I sit with her, the more I marvel at how reptilian she is. The lucency of her pale, round eyes. The waxy yellow skin about her Bakelite-black beak. The way she snakes her small head from side to side to focus on distant objects. Half the time she seems as alien as a snake, a thing hammered of metal and scales and glass. But then I see ineffably birdlike things about her, familiar qualities that turn her into something loveable and close. She scratches her fluffy chin with one awkward, taloned foot; sneezes when bits of errant down get up her nose. And when I look again she seems neither bird nor reptile, but a creature shaped by a million years of evolution for a life she's not yet lived. Those long, barred tail-feathers and short, broad wings are perfectly shaped for sharp

turns and brutal acceleration through a world of woodland obstacles; the patterns on her plumage will hide her in perfect, camouflaging drifts of light and shade. The tiny, hair-like feathers between her beak and eye – *crines* – are for catching blood so that it will dry, and flake, and fall away, and the frowning eyebrows that lend her face its hollow rapacious intensity are bony projections to protect her eyes when crashing into undergrowth after prey.

Everything about the hawk is tuned and turned to hunt and kill. Yesterday I discovered that when I suck air through my teeth and make a squeaking noise like an injured rabbit, all the tendons in her toes instantaneously contract, driving her talons into the glove with terrible, crushing force. This killing grip is an old, deep pattern in her brain, an innate response that hasn't yet found the stimulus meant to release it. Because other sounds provoke it: door hinges, squealing brakes, bicycles with unoiled wheels – and on the second afternoon, Joan Sutherland singing an aria on the radio. *Ow.* I laughed out loud at that. Stimulus: *opera.* Response: *kill.* But later these misapplied instincts stop being funny. At just past six o'clock a small, unhappy wail came from a pram outside the window. Straight away the hawk drove her talons into my glove, ratcheting up the pressure in savage, stabbing spasms. *Kill.* The baby cries. *Kill kill kill.*

Two days pass. I sit and walk, and sit and sleep, the hawk almost constantly on my fist. My arm aches and a damp tiredness grips my heart. A farming programme on the radio. Wheat, borage, rapeseed. Polytunnels and cherries. The hawk is alternately a hunchback toad, a nervous child or a dragon. The house is a tip. Scraps of raw meat decorate the bin. I've run out of coffee. I have forgotten how to speak. My mouth makes small, mumbled assurances to the hawk that all is well. She meets them with silence, with thready, nervous cheeps through her nose. As I walk she follows my

feet with her eyes as if they were two small animals moving about the house with us. She is interested in flies, in specks of floating dust, in the way light falls on certain surfaces. What is she looking at? What is she thinking? I hear the click of the nictitating membrane that crosses her eyes as she blinks, and now I see them closely her eyes begin to disturb me. They look like discs of pale paper stuck to the side of her head, each with a hole-punched black pupil housed under a transparent dome like a bubble of water. The hawk is stranger than I'd thought. And calmer than I'd believed possible.

I'm starting to worry. Is there something wrong with her? She's oddly tame. Where is the lunatic I'd expected? For two days I've sat with her and not once, *contra* White, have I longed to dismember her and batter her to death. I'd expected a barrelling tornado of terror and wildness, some great and awful struggle of souls, but instead, as the light deepens and the late swifts outside ascend on flickering wings to bury themselves in the sky, I sit on a sofa watching a tired hawk go to sleep. The leading edges of her wings drop and rest against the glove. One downy grey eyelid slides up to cover an eye, then the other. Her shoulders fall; her head wobbles. The tip of her glossy black beak sinks into the feathers over her crop. Watching her doze in this vesper hour my eyes close too, but when sleep comes I am standing in the skeleton of a burned-out house, in white, blank air that glitters faintly with mica or frost. Around me are blackened joists and rafters. I put out a hand. Touch a piece of charred wood. Cold, furred, wrong. Rising panic. Refusal. A sense of absolute dismay. Then of toppling, the house collapsing into itself and on top of me. And we wake together, the hawk and I, her with a start of apprehension, a tightening of feet and feathers, and me with a slow, sickening disorientation that makes me fasten desperately onto the sight of the hawk to drag me back into a world with no ash in it. The same thoughts over and over. Why is she sleeping so much? Hawks sleep when they're sick. She

must be sick. Why am I sleeping? Am I sick too? What is wrong with her? What is wrong with us?

Nothing was wrong with the hawk. She wasn't sick. She was a baby. She fell asleep because that's what babies do. I wasn't sick either. But I was orphaned and desperately suggestible, and I didn't know what was happening to me. For years I'd scoffed at White's notion of hawk-training as a rite of passage. *Overblown*, I'd thought. *Loopy*. Because it wasn't like that. I knew it wasn't. I'd flown scores of hawks, and every step of their training was familiar to me. But while the steps were familiar, the person taking them was not. I was in ruins. Some deep part of me was trying to rebuild itself, and its model was right there on my fist. The hawk was everything I wanted to be: solitary, self-possessed, free from grief, and numb to the hurts of human life.

I was turning into a hawk.

I didn't shrink and grow plumes like the Wart in *The Sword in the Stone*, who was transformed by Merlyn into a merlin as part of his magical education. I had loved that scene as a child. I had read it over and over again, thrilling at the Wart's toes turning to talons and scratching on the floor, his primary feathers bursting in soft blue quills from the end of his fingers. But I was turning into a hawk all the same.

The change came about through my grief, my watching, my not being myself. The first few days with a wild new hawk are a delicate, reflexive dance of manners. To judge when to scratch your nose without offence, when to walk and when to sit, when to retreat and when to come close, you must read your hawk's state of mind. You do this by watching her posture and her feathers, the workings of which turn the bird's shape into an exquisitely controlled barometer of mood. A hawk's simpler emotions are easily perceived. Feathers held tight to the body mean *I am afraid.* Held loosely they mean *I am at ease.* But the longer you watch a hawk the more

subtleties you see; and soon, in my hypervigilant state, I was responding to the tiniest of cues. A frowning contraction of the crines around her beak and an almost imperceptible narrowing of her eyes meant something like *happy*; a particular, fugitive expression on her face, oddly distant and reserved, meant *sleepy*.

To train a hawk you must watch it like a hawk, and so you come to understand its moods. Then you gain the ability to predict what it will do next. This is the sixth sense of the practised animal trainer. Eventually you don't see the hawk's body language at all. You seem to feel what it feels. Notice what it notices. The hawk's apprehension becomes your own. You are exercising what the poet Keats called your chameleon quality, the ability to 'tolerate a loss of self and a loss of rationality by trusting in the capacity to recreate oneself in another character or another environment'. Such a feat of imaginative recreation has always come easily to me. Too easily. It's part of being a watcher, forgetting who you are and putting yourself in the thing you are watching. That is why the girl who was me when I was small loved watching birds. She made herself disappear, and then in the birds she watched, took flight. It was happening now. I had put myself in the hawk's wild mind to tame her, and as the days passed in the darkened room my humanity was burning away.

Three tentative raps on the front door. 'Hang on,' I call. A small voice inside me, resentful and savage, hisses, *Go away*. It is Christina with two takeaway coffees and the Sunday papers. 'So,' she says, settling herself in a chair by the fireplace. 'How's it going? Is the hawk OK?' I nod. I raise my eyebrows. I am vaguely aware this isn't enough to make a conversation. 'Mmm,' I say. The voice is not entirely mine. She hugs her knees and looks at me curiously. *I must try harder*, I think. So I talk about the hawk for a while, and then I can't speak any more. I stare at my paper cup.

I'm pleased to see her. *She shouldn't be here*. This coffee is good. *We should be alone*. These resentful thoughts surprise me. Manning the hawk is all about showing it new things. Christina is a new thing. 'I'm going to try something,' I tell her. 'Ignore the hawk. Just keep reading the papers.' I fetch a fresh piece of beef from the kitchen, sit with the hawk on the sofa, reach up and remove her hood. There's a moment of fast-beating incomprehension and the air in the room turns to ice. Tight-feathered, in savage irresolution, eyes like porcelain saucers, the hawk stares. My heart sinks. She is going to bate. But the moment stretches, and she does not. After a deal of cautious observation she decides that a human turning newspaper pages is something entirely fascinating.

An hour later all is calm and companionable. We're watching television. The hawk balances evenly on the balls of her feet, mesmerised by the flickering screen. Tiny white wisps of down still attached to the finials of her scapular feathers wave in the draught from the hall. Then, without warning, she bursts from my fist in a whirlwind of a bate. Papers fly. Christina flinches. *Shit*, I think. *I should hood her, let her rest. This is too much*. But I am wrong. Fear did not engender this bate. Frustration did. She picks at her jesses in displaced fury, then tears at the meat beneath her toes. She is hungry. The food is a wonderful discovery. She is a delicate, decisive gastronome. She picks, and bites, and swallows, and squeaks in happiness, and bites and swallows again. I am thrilled. But also indignant. This moment was to have been born of solitude and meditative darkness. Not this. Not daylight with another person in the room and *'Allo 'Allo!* on the television. Not in the presence of comedy Nazis and a soundtrack about giant sausages and the occupation of France. She narrows her eyes with pleasure, bristles around the nose, and her feathers soften into loose falls of ochre and cream. 'Has she done that before?' asks Christina. 'No,' I say. 'This is the first time.' Laughter from the television audience as an SS officer

dressed as a woman hoves into view and the hawk finishes eating, lifts herself into a vast, frothy mop of feathers, holds them there for an instant and shakes them all back into place. A rouse. It is a sign of contentment. She has not roused before.

Now my hawk is tame enough to sit bareheaded. From her perch by the window she watches the curtains move over a carpet furred with dust. She won't yet be picked up without a bate. But I'm working on that. From the sofa I flick a thumbnail-sized scrap of steak towards her. It falls with a sticky *thwick* on the vinyl cloth beneath her perch. She looks down at it. Frowns. Turns her head to one side to inspect it more carefully. Then hops down with a scratch of talons and a rattle of feathers, picks the meat delicately from the floor and swallows it. Gone. For a while she stands there, as if trying to remember something she has forgotten, then bounces back onto the perch with brio, all shaggy trousers and waggy tail. I wait a while, then send another scrap of flesh her way. *Thwick. Hop. Swallow. Hop.* I lower myself to the floor and sit there for a while. Shuffling slowly sideways on my rump, I watch the hawk out of the corner of my eye. She tenses. I stop. She untenses. I move. She tenses. I stop again. I inch across the carpet until I reach that hair-fine juncture where any movement nearer will make her bate from the perch. Breathing as carefully as if I were about to take an extravagantly long rifle-shot, I slowly – so slowly – extend my garnished fist towards her. I can almost taste the hawk's indecision; the air is thick with it. But – joy! – she is looking at the food in front of her. She leans forward as if to pick it from the glove, but then something inside her snaps. With an awful clang of the metal ring of the perch against its steel base, she bates away from me. *Damn.* I take her up onto the glove for a few mouthfuls of food.

When she is settled back on her perch, we play the game again. *Flick. Hop. Flick.* She's solved the puzzle of

where the food is coming from and some part of her is reconsidering my place in her world. She watches me intently as I inch towards her and again extend the garnished glove. She leans across and snaps up my gift of steak. My heart leaps. She takes another piece, and then another, smacking her glossy black chops.

As I sit there happily feeding titbits to the hawk, her name drops into my head. *Mabel.* From *amabilis*, meaning loveable, or dear. An old, slightly silly name, an unfashionable name. There is something of the grandmother about it: antimacassars and afternoon teas. There's a superstition among falconers that a hawk's ability is inversely proportional to the ferocity of its name. Call a hawk *Tiddles* and it will be a formidable hunter; call it *Spitfire* or *Slayer* and it will probably refuse to fly at all. White called his hawk Gos for short, but also awarded him a host of darkly grandiose other names that for years made me roll my eyes in exasperation. Hamlet. Macbeth. Strindberg. Van Gogh. Astur. Baal. Medici. Roderick Dhu. Lord George Gordon. Byron. Odin. Nero. Death. Tarquin. Edgar Allan Poe. *Imagine*, I used to think, amused and faintly contemptuous. Imagine calling your goshawk any of those things! But now that list just made me sad. My hawk needed a name as far from that awful litany, as far from Death as it could get. 'Mabel.' I say the word out loud to her and watch her watching me say it. My mouth shapes the word. 'Mabel.' And as I say it, it strikes me that all those people outside the window who shop and walk and cycle and go home and eat and love and sleep and dream – all of them have names. And so do I. 'Helen,' I say. How strange it sounds. How very strange. I put another piece of meat on my glove and the hawk leans down and eats.

10

Darkness

He pours another whisky into his emptied glass and broods over the day's events. He is free, but he has shackled himself to a madman. A lunatic. At the very least, a sufferer of intermittent delusional insanity. He turns down the beam of the paraffin lamp and sinks back into the chair, gloomily rereading the report he has written on the progress of his goshawk's education.

> 6.15–6.45 walked round + round Gos, holding out a leg, while he bated whenever I came too close. Came away without feeding him. This is not in the book. I have done the same thing, with the same results, for fifteen minutes in every hour since (until 6 o'clock at night).

He despised that rabbit leg. He despised the fur on it, the claws, the crown of pale flesh that grew dry and waxen as the hours passed. He despised it because the hawk did not want it. The hawk did not want him either. He had whistled to the hawk all day and his lips had grown dry as the whistle gave out and his solicitude had thinned to frustration and finally despair. Last night the frustration had reached such a pitch that he'd prevented Gos from regaining the fist after a bate – worse, gloried in the hawk hanging there, revolving slowly on his jesses. It was a terrible sin. He is full of shame. And worry. Gos's mutes are green. Does that mean his hawk is sick? Maybe that is why he did not want the rabbit. What

should he do? *Starvation*, he thinks. That will cure the stomach upset, if it is one. Perhaps he shall give the hawk some egg tomorrow? But the most important thing of all is this: *he shall eat when he jumps for it, not before.*

White's plan would have worked, had he stuck to it. But he did not. By dawn Gos had been given the greater part of a rabbit to eat, and he had not jumped to the fist. Another resolution was broken. They all were. Even White's plan to keep the hawk awake for three days and nights had failed: he'd felt so sorry for Gos he kept returning him to his perch for short bouts of sleep. Freed from White's presence, Gos remembered how much better life was when not tied to a human who kept stroking it and talking to it and bothering it with slippery rabbit livers, and singing and whistling and moving glasses of liquid up and down. When he came to pick it up again the hawk was always as wild as ever.

Poor Gos. Poor, ragged, fearful, broken-feathered Gos. I thought of him often as I sat with my hawk. I saw him in black and white and a long way off, as if viewed through the wrong end of a telescope: a miniature, miserable hawk bating and twittering in distress on the grey lawns of a distant house. Gos was very real to me. But White was not. It was hard to imagine him with his hawk. Sitting with my own it was hard to imagine him at all. I looked at photographs, but they were all of different people: one was a pale-eyed man with a Shakespearian beard who'd written books under the pen-name James Aston, and another a thin young man with nervous eyes and a spare, haunted face who was Mr White the schoolmaster. There were photographs of White the countryman in an open-necked shirt and a tweed jacket, looking louche and amused. And photographs of White much later in his life: a corpulent, white-bearded English Hemingway, a woolly-sweatered Falstaff. I couldn't reconcile these faces. I read *The Goshawk* again as I sat with Mabel, read it many times, and every time it seemed

a different book; sometimes a caustically funny romance, sometimes the journal of a man laughing at failure, sometimes a heartbreaking tract of another man's despair.

But one White was clear to me as I manned my hawk. It was not White the falconer. It was the man who had, for the first time in his life, discovered the joys of domesticity. A man who painted woodwork the brightest of blues and reds, who arranged feathers in jars on his mantelpiece and made curries from prawns and eggs and spoons of thin-cut marmalade. I saw him boiling his laundry in the copper on the kitchen stove, and sitting in an armchair reading Masefield's *Midnight Folk* with his setter Brownie sleeping at his feet.

And I saw him drinking. There was always a bottle at White's side, and his battle with Gos made him drink all the more. 'It was not that one drank enough to become incapable or stupid,' he wrote, 'but alcohol now seemed the only way of continuing to live.' As I sat with my hawk and puzzled over White I wondered if it was alcohol that obscured him, blurred him from view. I knew the notion was fanciful, but even so there seemed some deep connection between White's drinking and his evasiveness. And I was sure that it was the drink that irrigated White's constant self-sabotage, for it is a common trait of alcoholics to make plans and promises, to oneself, to others, fervently, sincerely, and in hope of redemption. Promises that are broken, again and again, through fear, through loss of nerve, through any number of things that hide that deep desire, at heart, to obliterate one's broken self.

I opened the curtains the next morning. The brightness of the room made me clearer, which concerned her for a while. But when a broad stripe of sunlight fell across her back she raised her feathers to greet it. Now, standing in a shallow bath next to her perch, she nibbles her toes, takes precise and tiny bites of water. She jumps back onto her perch and begins to preen herself, contorting her body into the stylised shapes of

Japanese paintings of courtly goshawks. She runs her beak through one feather after another in quick succession: the sound is of paper being scored, or a pack of cards being shuffled. Then she stretches one broad wing behind her, drags it slowly back over her sunlit tail, and rouses, squeaking happily through her nose. I watch all this with a ravenous, gulping-down-champagne sense of joy. *Look how happy she is*, I think. This room is not a dungeon and I am not a torturer. I am a beneficent figure, one who crouches and stoops in anxious genuflection, bearing delicious treats of steak in my hand.

It is hubris. Less than an hour later I am certain that my hawk hates me and I am the worst falconer in the history of the world. No matter that Mabel is far tamer than any of the boys or books had told me she would be. *I've comprehensively failed her. The hawk is ruined.* I know this is true because she doesn't want to be hooded. Until now she has accepted the hood with equanimity. Earlier today I sensed a little thrum of disquiet in her heart and now it has exploded into outright rebellion. I bring the hood up to her head and she dodges it. Snakes her head. Contracts it into her neck. Ducks and runs.

I know why this is happening. To begin with the hood was a welcome refuge, but now she's decided I'm harmless it is merely something that stops her seeing, and she wants to see. Now, unhappy, unsettled, lifting one foot then the other, the hawk looks about the room for somewhere to go. Her mood is contagious; my heart flutters tightly, heavily in my chest. I have lost the ability to disappear. I try to remove myself by listening to the cricket on the radio but can't understand what the commentator is saying. I can only turn my attention from my unhappy hawk by thinking about the hood I'm holding. It is all she is thinking of too.

I remember hauling this hood out of my bag while looking for a pen before a university seminar a few months ago. 'What's that?' asked a colleague.

'A falcon hood,' I said, not looking up.

'Have you brought it in to show it to people?'

'No. It was just in my bag.'

'But can I look at it?'

'Absolutely, go ahead.'

She picked it up, fascinated. 'What an amazing thing,' she said, frowning under her straight-cut fringe. 'It goes over the hawk's head to keep it quiet, right?' And she looked inside, where the moulded leather was stitched with lines of hair-fine thread, and then turned it over in her hands, examining the bevelled opening for the hawk's beak and the plaited Turk's-head knot you hold it by, and the two long braces at the back that pull the hood open and closed. She set it back on the table reverently. 'It's so beautifully made,' she said. 'It's like a Prada shoe.'

Indeed. This hood is among the best of its kind. It was made by an American falconer called Doug Pineo and it weighs almost nothing. A few grams. That is all. Something about its perfect lightness set against the heaviness of my heart makes me giddy. I shut my eyes and my head is full of hoods. Modern American hoods like this one. Loose-braced Bahraini hoods of soft goatskin for passage sakers and peregrines. Syrian hoods. Turkmen hoods. Afghan hoods. Tiny Indian hoods in snakeskin for shikras and sparrowhawks. Huge eagle hoods from Central Asia. Sixteenth-century French hoods cut from white kidskin embroidered with golden thread and painted with coats of arms. They're not a European invention. Frankish knights learned how to use hoods from Arab falconers during the Crusades, and a shared love of falconry made hawks political pawns in those wars. When a white gyrfalcon owned by King Philip I of Spain broke its leash during the Siege of Acre and flew up to the city walls, the king sent an envoy into the city to request its return. Saladin refused, and Philip sent another envoy, accompanied by trumpets, ensigns and heralds, offering a thousand gold crowns for the falcon. Was it returned? I can't recall.

Did it matter? No, I think savagely. *They're all dead. Long dead.* I think of Saladin taking the king's falcon onto his own hand and covering its eyes with leather. *I own this. It is mine.* I think of fetish hoods. I think of distant wars. I think of Abu Ghraib. Sand in the mouth. Coercion. History and hawks and hoods and the implications of taking something's sight away to calm it. *It's in your own best interest.* Rising nausea. There's a sensation of ground being lost, of wet sand washing from under my feet. I don't want to think of the photographs of the tortured man with the hood on his head and the wires to his hands and the invisible enemy who holds the camera, but it is all I can see and the word *hood* like a hot stone in my mouth. *Burqa*, the word in Arabic. Hood.

I start speaking to the hawk – I think to the hawk – in a voice as low and reassuring as I can make it. 'When you travel in the car, Mabel,' I say, 'there'll be lots of frightening things out there and we can't have you crashing about while I drive. It is just to keep you feeling safe.' And then, 'It is necessary.' I hear myself say it. *It is necessary.* That is what I am telling myself. But I don't like it. Nor does she. Patiently I offer it again. 'Look,' I say carefully. 'Just a hood.' I move it slowly up to her feathered chin. She bates. I wait until she settles and move it up to her chin again. *Bate.* And again. *Bate. Bate. Bate.* I want to be gentle. I *am* being gentle, but my gentleness is a veneer on raging despair. I don't want to hood her. She knows it. On the radio the cricket commentator explains in gleeful detail why a batsman's defensive stroke has failed. 'Shut up, Aggers,' I snap, and try once again. 'Come on, Mabel,' I say beseechingly, and in another minute the hood is on, she is back on her perch, and I am slumped on the sofa. The world is burning and I don't want to touch it. *This is a disaster. A disaster. I can't do this. Not any of it. I am a terrible falconer.* I burst into tears. The hawk dissolves. I curl up, bury my face in a cushion and cry myself to sleep.

* * *

Forty minutes later Stuart is assessing the hawk with narrowed, practised eyes. 'Small, isn't she?' he says, dragging four fingers thoughtfully down one stubbled cheek. 'But she's a good-looking gos. Long body. Long tail. Bird hawk.'

By this he means my goshawk might be better suited to fly at pheasants and partridges than rabbits or hares.

'Yes.'

'How're you doing with her?' asks Mandy. She's sitting on my sofa rolling a cigarette, looking amazing, like a rural punk princess from an unlikely Thomas Hardy novel. I tell her that the hawk is surprisingly tame and everything's going well. But it is a dreadful lie. When they'd knocked on the door and roused me from sleep I knew I had to maintain some desperate fiction of competence. And so far I'd managed this, though there'd been a nasty moment when Mandy looked at me with concern in her eyes and I realised my own were red and raw. *It's OK*, I told myself. *She'll think I've been crying about Dad.* I pick up the hawk and stand there like someone with a present at a party and no clear idea to whom I should hand it. 'Lie down, Jess,' says Stuart. The black and white English pointer they've brought flops onto the rug and lets out a sigh. I unhood Mabel. She stands on tiptoe, the tip of her beak pressed to her spangled and silvery chest, looking down at this new phenomenon that is a dog. The dog looks at her. So do we. There is a curious silence. I mistake it for anger. For disappointment. For anything but what it is: astonishment. A look of wonder passes over Stuart's face. 'Well,' he says, eventually. 'You've got gold, there. I thought she'd freak out completely. She's very well manned.'

'Really?'

'She's so calm, Helen!' says Mandy.

It takes me a while to even half-believe them, but it helps that I manage to hood Mabel without too much fuss – and after two cups of tea and an hour in their company the world is bright again. 'Don't drag your feet,' Stuart says as they

leave. 'Get her out of the house. Take her outside. Man her in the streets.' I know he is right. It's time for the next stage of training.

Carriage is what falconers call walking with a hawk to tame it, and all my books insisted it was the key to a well-trained gos. 'The key to her management is to carry, carry, carry,' wrote Gilbert Blaine. It was 'the grand secret of discipline' to Edward Michell. Back in the seventeenth century Edward Bert had explained that when you walk with a hawk 'her eye doth still behold change of objects', which is why carriage works – and why you can't tame a hawk by keeping her indoors. Such a hawk 'will endure nothing, because shee hath not beene made acquainted with any thing', he says. *Oh, Edmund Bert*, I think. *I wish it was still the seventeenth century. There'd have been fewer things out there to frighten my hawk.*

But I knew that wasn't true. There'd have been carts and horses and crowds and dogs and they'd have been just as frightening for a half-manned goshawk as buses and mopeds and students on bikes. The difference was that in 1615 no one would have paid me the slightest attention. Hawks on the streets of Cambridge would have been as unremarkable a sight as dogs on leads today. Walking with my hawk will be an open invitation for everyone to come up and stare, and enquire, and quiz me about the hawk, and what she is, and who I am, and why. And beneath my disinclination to engage in conversation there is a much simpler terror: people. Just people. I don't want to see people at all. After the door is closed I look at it for a long while, rubbing my cheek where the cushion had left a deep, indented scar.

Later that afternoon I take Mabel into the walled garden of my college house. Above us is a deep field of fast-moving cumulus. Branches lift in the breeze; leaves shift with a collapsing, papery flicker. The air is thick with sun and dust and dandelion seeds. There's too much light, too much contrast.

Too much noise and movement. I flinch at the hurry of it all. But the hawk? The hawk is unperturbed. She tips her head sideways to look up at the moving clouds – in daylight her irises are flat and shiny and slightly blurred, with pupils that dilate and contract like a camera lens as she focuses – zip-zip-zip – up to track a passing Cessna – and then she turns her head upside down to watch a fly, and then tracks another fly, and pulls abstractedly at the meat I hold in the glove, and watches other things way, way beyond my poor human vision.

The world she lives in is not mine. Life is faster for her; time runs slower. Her eyes can follow the wingbeats of a bee as easily as ours follow the wingbeats of a bird. *What is she seeing?* I wonder, and my brain does backflips trying to imagine it, because I can't. I have three different receptor-sensitivities in my eyes: red, green and blue. Hawks, like other birds, have four. This hawk can see colours I cannot, right into the ultraviolet spectrum. She can see polarised light, too, watch thermals of warm air rise, roil, and spill into clouds, and trace, too, the magnetic lines of force that stretch across the earth. The light falling into her deep black pupils is registered with such frightening precision that she can see with fierce clarity things I can't possibly resolve from the generalised blur. The claws on the toes of the house martins overhead. The veins on the wings of the white butterfly hunting its wavering course over the mustards at the end of the garden. I'm standing there, my sorry human eyes overwhelmed by light and detail, while the hawk watches everything with the greedy intensity of a child filling in a colouring book, scribbling joyously, blocking in colour, making the pages its own. And all I can think is, *I want to go back inside.*

II

Leaving home

Keys in pocket, hawk on fist, and off we go. Leaving the house that evening is frightening. Somewhere in my mind ropes uncoil and fall. It feels like an unmooring, as if I were an airship ascending on its maiden flight into darkness. Stepping over the low railings into the park I head for the thick black avenue of limes and the lamplit leaves beneath. Everything seems hot and clean and dangerous and my senses are screwed to their utmost, as if someone had told me the park was full of hungry lions. Night air moves in the spaces between the trees. Moths make dusty circles about the lamps. I look down and see each pale blade of grass casts two separate shadows from the two nearest lamps, and so do I, and in the distance comes the collapsing echo of a moving train and somewhere closer a dog barks twice and there's broken glass by the path and next to it a feather from the breast of a woodpigeon judging by its size and curl. It lies upon the grass as if held just above it, gleaming softly in the darkness.

'Bloody hell, Mabel,' I whisper. 'Who spiked my tea with acid?' Night has never looked like this before. I walk deeper into this lamplit world, wondering at my heightened perception and reassured by how unconcerned the hawk is. She does not look up. She couldn't care less about her surroundings. She is hunched busily over the rabbit leg in my glove. It is a *tiring* – a piece of sinewy, bony meat to keep her occupied as we walk, drawing her attention from the things

around her. She pulls and picks scraps from it with the rapt concentration of a diner disassembling a lobster. Watching her I begin to relax. And straight away the emptied world is full of people.

But they are not people. They are things to shun, to fear, to turn from, shielding my hawk. They come towards us like tumbling rocks in a video game, threatening destruction with the merest glancing blow. My heart beats fast. Escape and evasion. I am here to show the hawk people, but from a safe distance merely, and those three men in pastel shirts are heading right towards us. I dodge behind a tree trunk and let them pass. As their backs enter Mabel's line of sight she sucks her feathers in so tightly she seems vacuum-packed in plastic. When they are gone she shakes her head nervously, cheeps once through her nose and starts eating again.

A minute later a woman swinging supermarket bags is upon us. There's nowhere to go. *Where did all these bloody people come from?* I look about in desperation. Mabel is now a pair of huge and haunted eyes, a ghost of bones and sinews, seconds from a bate. I hold her close to my chest and turn in a slow circle to block the woman from view. The woman doesn't see the hawk. What she sees is a weirdo in a tattered jacket and baggy corduroy trousers revolving on the spot for no good reason. She hurries past, fast. There's a sense of dreadful escalation. *It's fine*, I tell myself. *This is going well*, but blood sings loud in my ears. A bicycle hisses by. The hawk bates. I curse. Another bicycle. She bates again. My nerve breaks. I start back to the house. We are nearly at the door when a runner passes – he's come up silently behind us on his expensive trainers – and the hawk bates once again. I hate him for upsetting my hawk – actually hate him, am outraged by his existence. All the anger within me, the anger I didn't know was there, the anger the books call One of the Five Stages of Grief rears up in a towering instant of white-hot fury. I look at his retreating back and wish him death.

But then he breaks stride, turns back, and stops ten feet from us.

'Sorry,' I say, smiling and biting back ire. 'It's her first time out of the house, and she's still scared of people.'

'God, no. I'm sorry,' he says. 'I didn't see her.'

He's a person, I realise. A real person, skinny and bearded and wearing a blue T-shirt and with a water bottle in his hand and he is friendly and wary and a little in awe of the hawk. I think he might be a nice man.

'I hope I didn't startle you,' I begin apologetically. He grins and shakes his head.

'I was surprised! It's not something you see every day!'

I turn briefly to the hawk as she bends down to pull at the rabbit leg again. I open my mouth to speak. But when I look up he has gone.

It is bright, after heavy rain, and the crowds of closing time have gone. On this second expedition from the house Mabel grips the glove more tightly than ever. She is tense. She looks smaller and feels heavier in this mood, as if fear had a weight to it, as if pewter had been poured into her long and airy bones. The raindrop marks on her tight-feathered front run together into long lines like those around a downturned mouth. She picks fitfully at her food, but mostly she stares, taut with reserve, about her. She follows bicycles with her eyes. She hunches ready to spring when people come too close. Children alarm her. She is unsure about dogs. Big dogs, that is. Small dogs fascinate her for other reasons.

After ten minutes of haunted apprehension, the goshawk decides that she's not going to be eaten, or beaten to death, by any of these things. She rouses and begins to eat. Cars and buses rattle fumily past, and when the food is gone she stands staring at the strange world around her. So do I. I've been with the hawk so long, just her and me, that I'm seeing my city through her eyes. She watches a woman throwing a ball to

her dog on the grass, and I watch too, as baffled by what she's doing as the hawk is. I stare at traffic lights before I remember what they are. Bicycles are spinning mysteries of glittering metal. The buses going past are walls with wheels. What's salient to the hawk in the city is not what is salient to man. The things she sees are uninteresting to her. Irrelevant. Until there's a clatter of wings. We both look up. There's a pigeon, a woodpigeon, sailing down to roost in a lime tree above us. Time slows. The air thickens and the hawk is transformed. It's as if all her weapons systems were suddenly engaged. Red cross-hairs. She stands on her toes and cranes her neck. *This. This flightpath. This thing*, she thinks. *This is fascinating.* Some part of the hawk's young brain has just worked something out, and it has everything to do with death.

'For the goshawk,' wrote White, 'the necessity was a long walk on the fist; as it always was.' But he walked as if the walking itself were the secret, not his attention to the feelings of his hawk. Even in the aftermath of my father's death my tattered heart knew that the secret to taming hawks was to take things slowly. To move from darkness to light, from enclosed rooms into the open air, to stand at a distance, first, and then grow closer, over many days, to this alien world of raucous voices and swinging arms, of bright plastic buggies and roaring mopeds. Day by day, foot by foot, mouthful by mouthful, my hawk would come to see that these things were not a threat, and would look upon them with equanimity.

But it was continuous murder for Gos. White walked because that was what the books said he should do, and so that was what he did, taking Gos outside even on the day he arrived. Forty-eight hours later he was walked to the Wheelers' farmhouse to meet 'all the family, barking dogs and all', and the next day they were out on the road meeting cars and cyclists. 'He bates repeatedly on these trips,' White noted in his day-book. On it went. He took Gos with him to the pub,

took him fishing for carp, took him to Banbury in a motor car. 'He had to learn to stand that bustle,' wrote White, 'as we all have to do, however little we visit it.' And he did. Just as the despairing soul will finally comprehend its helplessness in the face of continuing horror and bear it because there is no alternative, so with Gos. He had no alternative. There was no softness in his taming. He had to learn to bear things through being frightened all the time, just as White had learned there was no escape in his own education.

Down the small roads and grassy rides and across fields damp with standing hay, White walked himself into the landscape. Whole days went past on foot, the novice austringer sinking gratefully into the rhythm and weather of the land. Walking home in the evening along the high-hedged Buckinghamshire lanes he watched 'the red moon perceptibly rising', which he 'had seen to sink as a yellow one at dawn'. At night the world became magical by virtue of its emptiness, and the Ridings a place of mists and stars and solitude. This was his patient excursion into the fields and back into the past.

Despite the eccentricity of a hawk on his fist, what White was doing was very much of his time. Long walks in the English countryside, often at night, were astonishingly popular in the 1930s. Rambling clubs published calendars of full moons, train companies laid on mystery trains to rural destinations, and when in 1932 the Southern Railway offered an excursion to a moonlit walk along the South Downs, expecting to sell forty or so tickets, one and a half thousand people turned up. The people setting out on these walks weren't seeking to conquer peaks or test themselves against maps and miles. They were looking for a mystical communion with the land; they walked backwards in time to an imagined past suffused with magical, native glamour: to Merrie England, or to prehistoric England, pre-industrial visions that offered solace and safety to sorely troubled minds. For though railways and roads and a burgeoning market in countryside books had

contributed to this movement, at heart it had grown out of the trauma of the Great War, and was flourishing in fear of the next. The critic Jed Esty has described this pastoral craze as one element in a wider movement of national cultural salvage in these years; it was a response to economic disaster, a contracting Empire and totalitarian threats from abroad. It was a movement that celebrated ancient sites and folk traditions. It delighted in Shakespeare and Chaucer, in Druids, in Arthurian legend. It believed that something essential about the nation had been lost and could be returned, if only in the imagination. White, caught up in this conservative, antiquarian mood, walked with his hawk and wrote of ghosts, of starry Orion naked and resplendent in the English sky, of all the imaginary lines men and time had drawn upon the landscape. By the fire, his hawk by his side, he brooded on the fate of nations.

The cloud-base is low today. It does not matter. He is not flying today. He is walking. He is walking with his hawk, and he and Gos have traversed five fields to get here. Now he stands by the ruins of the chapel of St Thomas the Martyr. Once it was a chapel, then it was a house, and now it is a ruin, a great, collapsing carcass of stained ironstone. The roof is a broken ribcage heaped with rotting thatch. Lintels sag over windows and doors blocked with laths and limestone rubble. Great banks of nettles grow here, rich and green. Ash trees rise in lacy fists and the fields fall away each side. It is very quiet. He hears the ticking of a robin somewhere, like falling water. This place is soundly cursed against man, he thinks. The stink of the dead sheep he found dumped in a drain is still caught in his nose, a sorry, sodden wreck of fleece pullulating with maggots. He does not mind the smell. It is a bracing stench. It is the smell of mortality. He looks down at the rabbit-cropped turf. Beneath him, the people that lived and died and were buried here are here still, he

thinks; their old bones would be grateful to see a goshawk again. He walks around the chapel, imagining the earth beneath him turning and muttering as it senses the familiar hawk above, as the bones of farm labourers mutter when agricultural machinery passes over their forgotten tombs.

> I thought of the small race now underground, strangers of a vanished species safe from comprehension, almost from imagination: monks, nuns, and the eternal villein. I was as close to them as anybody now, close even to Chaucer, 'with grey goshawk in hond'. They would understand my hawk with their eyes, as a farmer understood an elevator. We loved each other.

White's visit to Chapel Green was my favourite part of *The Goshawk* when I was young. It was a communion with something lost and forgotten, and somehow a hawk was at the heart of it. It always gave me a sense of kinship with White – although I couldn't imagine why farmers should have special knowledge of elevators. That made no sense at all. *Maybe he meant to write 'tractor'*, I thought, for I didn't know then what a bale elevator was, nor that White had been lately watching the Wheelers, who farmed the land around him, using one. But I could imagine the chapel quite clearly when I was small, and now it was clearer than ever. If I shut my eyes I saw White lifting Gos on his fist and shutting his own eyes very tight, as if it were possible for the whole mess of the twentieth century to slip aside, and the world of centuries before be resurrected, a lost community with him at its heart. He would have been loved. He would have been understood.

Looking back, and all for love. There was a telescope on my bookshelf at the far end of the room. A spotting scope in a green Cordura cover. I'd borrowed it from my father to go birdwatching and it had not been returned. I'd forgotten to bring it with me on that last visit. 'Next time,' he said, shaking

his head with good-natured exasperation. There was no next time. I could not give it back. I could not apologise to him either. There was a time, perhaps the day after his death, or perhaps the day after that, when I sat on a train with my mother and brother. We were on our way to look for his car. It was a desperate journey. My hands clutched the coarse upholstery of the seat until my knuckles turned white. I remember buddleia, and trackside clinker, and a green gasometer, and Battersea Power Station as the train slowed. And it wasn't until we were standing on Queenstown Road station, on an unfamiliar platform under a white wooden canopy, wasn't until we were walking towards the exit, that I realised, for the first time, that I would never see my father again.

Ever. I stopped dead. And I shouted. I called out loud for him. *Dad*. And then the word *No* came out in one long, collapsing howl. My brother and mother put their arms around me, and I them. Brute fact. I would never speak to him again. I would never see him again. We clung to each other, crying for Dad, the man we loved, the quiet man in a suit with a camera on his shoulder, who had set out each day in search of things that were new, who had captured the courses of stars and storms and streets and politicians, who had stopped time by making pictures of the movings of the world. My father, who had gone out to photograph storm-damaged buildings in Battersea, on that night when the world had visited him with damage and his heart had given way.

The photographs he'd taken were still on the camera they handed to my mother at the hospital. The last photograph I saw only once. I never want to see it again. But I can never stop seeing it. Blurred, taken from a low angle, far too low; an empty London street. Sodium lights, dusk, a wall tipped sideways from the vertical and running into the distance; a vanishing point of sallow, stormy sky.

12

Outlaws

'Come on, Mabel!' I'm kneeling on the carpet and holding out a dead day-old cockerel chick. My freezer is packed with their sad, fluffy corpses, by-products of industrial egg production. Mabel loves them. She stares longingly at the one in my glove. I hold it just out of reach and whistle. 'You can do it!' I say. 'Jump!' But she is doing everything she can to avoid jumping. It is comical. She leans. She leans further. She stretches her neck as far as it will go and opens her beak hopefully. The food is just there. She can't reach it. She overbalances, scrambles upright. A change in tactics is required. She makes a cobra-strike grab for the meat with one great, grasping foot. Her reach is astonishing; her legs are almost as long as she is. One feathered shin flashes out, tawny as a lion's, and her talons very nearly catch on the glove. But not quite.

Now she is cross. She paces up and down. She stamps and grips her perch. Her black-feathered moustaches harden into frown-lines down her jaw, and I can feel her bristling. She snakes her head from side to side, reckoning distances. Something is changing in her. I sense it with a shiver. It is as if the room is darkening, contracting to a point. Then something happens. My hand is hit, hard, with a blow so unexpectedly powerful the shock is carried down my spine to the tips of my toes. Hitting someone's hand with a baseball bat would have a similar effect. She is on the glove,

mantling her great, barred wings over it, gripping it fiercely and tearing at the meat. Disarticulated pieces of chicken disappear fast down her throat. I am delighted. She has crossed a great psychological gulf, one far wider than the ten inches of air between her perch and the glove she's landed upon. Not that she's landed on it: she's killed it. There is no mercy in that ratcheting, numbing grip. Mabel can keep up this pressure with no effort whatsoever. It is an effort for her to let go.

I choose my moment. When her head is up swallowing a mouthful of chick, I tug its remains through my palm and spirit it away. She looks down, then behind her, then at the floor. *Where did it go?* I persuade her to step back onto her perch. Then I hold the chick out once more, and further away. Instantly I feel that terrible blow. It is a killing blow, but there is something about the force of it that reminds me that I am alive.

I was alive, yes, but exhausted. I felt as if I were built of wool. Grey, loose-spun wool on an aching set of bones. My walks with the hawk were stressful, requiring endless vigilance, and they were wearing me away. As the hawk became tamer I was growing wilder. Fear was contagious: it rose unbidden in my heart as people approached us. I was no longer certain if the hawk bated because she was frightened of what she saw, or if the terror she felt was mine. And something else had happened on our walks. We had become invisible. The people passing by didn't stop, didn't look, sent not even a sideways glance in our direction. Some part of me began to believe that they didn't see us at all; that we were walking in another dimension, as if we were ghosts, or they were. I thought of those goshawks I'd seen as a child staring out at a winter afternoon from the world I now inhabited. And at night, at home, I stood at the window watching the lights outside, pressing my forehead against

the pane to feel the faint ticking of summer rain through glass and bone.

Everyone saw us. Of course they did. A woman stalking the park with a bloody great hawk on her fist and a baleful stare on her face is hardly inconspicuous. Everyone saw us; they just pretended they hadn't. But some people were brave enough to look. The next morning, for example, standing in thin rain watching flotillas of umbrellas move across the park, I notice a man. He stands against a fence twenty feet away, hands resting equably on the wooden rail, watching us with a face as expressionless as if he were regarding horses in a field. I walk over and say hello. He is from Kazakhstan, he says, and we talk about my hawk, and about Kazakh falconers, *berkutchi*, who fly golden eagles from horseback as they have done for thousands of years. He has never seen the eagles, he says, because he lives in a city. In Almaty. He asks if my hawk has a hood. I give it to him. He turns it in his hands, nods at its workmanship, gives it back to me. Only then do we properly introduce ourselves. His name is Kanat. He asks where I will hunt with the hawk. 'On farmland a few miles from here,' I reply. He nods, looks searchingly at Mabel, and is silent for a long time. Then he spreads his fingers wide on the wooden rail and stares at the backs of his hands and at the cuffs of his brown leather jacket. 'I miss my country,' he says.

Soon after he leaves a cyclist skids to a halt and asks politely if he can look at the bird. He is absurdly handsome. He stands there with his Antonio Banderas hair, and his expensive technical jacket and titanium bike beaded with rain, and admires the hell out of her. 'She is *beautiful*,' he says. He is trying to find another word but it evades him. Beautiful will have to do. He says it again. Then he thanks me over and over again for the hawk. 'So close!' he says. 'I have never seen a hawk so close.' In Mexico he has only seen wild ones, and only far away. 'I like to watch them because

they are . . .' And he makes a movement with one hand as if it were something lifting into the air. 'Free,' I say. He nods, and I do too, and in some wonder, because I am beginning to see that for some people a hawk on the hand of a stranger urges confession, urges confidences, lets you speak words about hope and home and heart. And I realise, too, that in all my days of walking with Mabel the only people who have come up and spoken to us have been outsiders: children, teenage goths, homeless people, overseas students, travellers, drunks, people on holiday. 'We are outsiders now, Mabel,' I say, and the thought is not unpleasant. But I feel ashamed of my nation's reticence. Its desire to keep walking, to move on, not to comment, not to interrogate, not to take any interest in something peculiar, unusual, in anything that isn't entirely normal.

I'm in an expansive, celebratory mood. Today Mabel flew four feet to my fist from the back of a chair in my front room. 'You're doing brilliantly,' I tell her. 'Time for a walk. Let's go and meet my friend's kids. They'll love you.' A few minutes later I knock on a door and my friend's husband opens it. My hawk flinches. So do I: this man was exceptionally rude to me once. But whatever. It doesn't matter. Maybe he was having a bad day. Forgive, forget. My friend isn't in. I stand before the door and tell him about the hawk. I tell him her age, her sex, her species, her name. I tell him that I'd thought her taming would be the kind of agonising battle I'd read about in *The Goshawk*. 'But it's been a total surprise,' I say. 'There's been no battle at all. Which isn't my doing, I'm sure. She's a freakishly calm hawk.' And the man inclines his head to one side, and smiles.

'Well,' he says, 'that'll be a gendered thing.'

'Gendered?'

'Yes. You're a woman, and she's female. Of *course* you get on,' he says.

He seems deadly serious. I stare at his curled hand on the

doorframe and heat rises in my face. *This is mockery*. For the first time in weeks, the hawk disappears from my mind as some part of me bunches up into one firm and unspoken sentence: *What an asshole.*

He's saying because I'm training a female hawk, there's some bond of sisterhood between us? *What the hell?* We're different *species*, for God's sake. 'I don't think that's a factor in my hawk's behaviour,' I say, and smile. It's a thin smile. The smile of the placator. It is a smile that is a veneer on murder. I rage my way home, heart bating wildly. Back in the house, hawk on her perch, I collect myself. My anger has gone: now I am fascinated. I pull all the falconry books off the shelves and pile them up on the floor. Then I sit cross-legged next to the hawk. 'Right, Mabel,' I say, 'Goshawks are boys' birds, are they? Let's see what the boys have said about you.' I pick up Humphrey ap Evans' *Falconry for You*, and read. 'She purrs and chirps to her master, rubbing her head against him. But she is proud and wild and beautiful: her anger is terrible to behold. She can be moody and sulky.'

Hmm.

Now I open Gilbert Blaine, and there I read of her 'peculiar and somewhat sulky disposition'. 'She will set her mind on making herself as disagreeable as she can,' he explained; 'will exasperate you to such a degree that you will long to wring her neck.' Then to Frank Illingworth's *Falcons and Falconry*: 'Never was there a more contrary bird than the gos! Her sole purpose in life seems to be to aggravate her owner.' 'Mabel, this is very dubious,' I say. Then I start on the Victorian falconers. Charles Hawkins Fisher did 'not like her or her kin', and Freeman and Salvin considered it 'a thousand pities that the temper of this bird is so very far from amiable; it is, in fact, sulky'.

'Sulky. Oh my God, Mabel. You know what you are? You're a woman. You're a hormonal woman!' It made such ghastly sense. It was why these falconers never wondered if

their own behaviour had anything to do with why their goshawks took stand in trees, or flew into fits of nerves, or rage, or attacked their dogs, or decided to fly away. It wasn't their fault. Like women, Goshawks were inexplicable. Sulky. Flighty and hysterical. Their moods were pathological. They were beyond all reason.

But reading further back I find that in the seventeenth century goshawks weren't vile at all. They were 'sociable and familiar', though by nature 'altogether shye and fearfull' wrote Simon Latham in 1615. They 'take exception' at 'rough and harsh behaviour from the man', but if treated with kindness and consideration, are 'as loving and fond of her Keeper as any other Hawke whatsoever'. These hawks, too, were talked about as if they were women. They were things to win, to court, to love. But they were not hysterical monsters. They were real, contradictory, self-willed beings, 'stately and brave', but also 'shye and fearfull'. If they behaved in ways that irritated the falconer it was because he had not treated them well, had not demonstrated 'continuall loving and curteous behaviour towards them'. The falconer's role, wrote Edmund Bert, was to provide for all his hawk's needs so that she might have 'joye in her selfe'. 'I am her friend,' he wrote of his goshawk, 'and shee my playfellow.'

A more cynical eye might have seen these Elizabethan and Jacobean men as boasting about their hawk-training skills; old-school pick-up artists in a bar talking up their seduction routines. But I wasn't cynical. They had won me over, these long-dead men who loved their hawks. They were reconciled to their otherness, sought to please them and be their friends. I wasn't under any illusion that women were better off in early-modern England, and assumed it was a fear of female emancipation that had made goshawks so terribly frightening to later falconers – but even so I knew which kind of relationship I preferred.

I look at Mabel. She looks at me. So much of what she

means is made of people. For thousands of years hawks like her have been caught and trapped and brought into people's houses. But unlike other animals that have lived in such close proximity to man, they have never been domesticated. It's made them a powerful symbol of wildness in myriad cultures, and a symbol, too, of things that need to be mastered and tamed.

I close my copy of Bert's *Treatise of Hawks and Hawking* with a snap, and as the cover falls my hawk makes a curious, bewitching movement. She twitches her head to one side then turns it upside down and continues to regard me with the tip of her beak pointing at the ceiling. I am astonished. I've seen this head-turning before. Baby falcons do it when they play. But goshawks? *Really?* I pull a sheet of paper towards me, tear a long strip from one side, scrunch it into a ball, and offer it to the hawk in my fingers. She grabs it with her beak. It crunches. She likes the sound. She crunches it again and then lets it drop, turning her head upside down as it hits the floor. I pick it up and offer it to her again. She grabs it and bites it very gently over and over again: *gnam gnam gnam*. She looks like a glove puppet, a Punch and Judy crocodile. Her eyes are narrowed in bird-laughter. I am laughing too. I roll a magazine into a tube and peer at her through it as if it were a telescope. She ducks her head to look at me through the hole. She pushes her beak into it as far as it will go, biting the empty air inside. Putting my mouth to my side of my paper telescope I boom into it: 'Hello, Mabel.' She pulls her beak free. All the feathers on her forehead are raised. She shakes her tail rapidly from side to side and shivers with happiness.

An obscure shame grips me. I had a fixed idea of what a goshawk was, just as those Victorian falconers had, and it was not big enough to hold what goshawks are. No one had ever told me goshawks played. It was not in the books. I had not imagined it was possible. I wondered if it was

because no one had ever played with them. The thought made me terribly sad.

In a letter to White, Gilbert Blaine explained that he didn't like goshawks because their 'crazy and suspicious temperament had alienated him from them, as it had most falconers'. 'Perhaps for this reason,' White wrote, years later, 'I had loved Gos. I always loved the unteachable, the untouchable, the underdog.' Gos was a queer thing, the opposite of civilised English hearts, and through him White could play many selves: the benevolent parent, the innocent child, the kindly teacher, the patient pupil. And other, stranger selves: through the hawk White could become a mother, a 'man who for two months had made that bird, almost like a mother nourishing her child inside her, for the subconsciousness of the bird and the man became really linked by a mind's cord: to the man who had created out of a part of his life'. And in White's notebooks, the ones written in green ink, he begins writing things late at night in a drunken, expansive hand that never make their way into his book because they are too revealing.

> The thing he most hates is to have his head stroked, the thing he most likes is to have his tail feathers pulled, stroked, pruned & sorted out. In fact, Gos shows much interest in his backward parts. He is a coprophilite, if not a pansy. He can slice his mutes 3 yards and always turns proudly round to look at them. I, however, who can pee continually for several minutes (and this he supposes to be some form of slicing) excite his interest and envy.

There are many ways to read *The Goshawk*, and one of them is as a work of suppressed homosexual desire – not for flesh, but for blood, for kinship. You can sense it is the book of a lonely man who felt he was different, who was searching for others like him. Falconry wasn't a particularly queer sport,

though some of the falconers White corresponded with, like Jack Mavrogordato and Ronald Stevens, were gay. Perhaps Blaine, too: he never married. But falconers were a fellowship of men, a 'monkish elite', a 'small, tenacious sect', as Lord Tweedsmuir described them, who felt a love that other people did not understand. It was a love that was not considered normal, and it was not something they could help. Gilbert Blaine explained that 'deeply rooted in the nature of certain individuals [exists] some quality which inspires a natural liking for hawks'. The 'true falconer', he wrote, 'is born, not made'. And in years to come White would write of how falconry gave him a comforting sense of unspoken fellowship with like-minded men:

> It was not until I had kept some hawks by myself that I met another mature falconer, and saw his birds, and talked to him. Then, for the first time, I found the heart turning over with excitement at the spectacle of falcons in first plumage: found that neither of us needed to complete the grammar of a question or answer.

It was a revelation: he saw now that right back to prehistory there had been men like him. 'I thought it was right that I should now be happy to continue as one of a long line,' he wrote, musing on a photograph that showed a carving of an Assyrian falconer from three thousand years ago. He closed his eyes and imagined reaching back across the centuries to grasp 'that ancestor's bony hand, in which all the knuckles were as well-defined as the nutty calf of his bas-relief leg'.

To public-school men raised on tales of knights and chivalry, the sensation of time-travelling that falconry provoked could be overwhelming. When the countryside writer J. Wentworth Day went hawking with the British Falconers' Club in the late 1920s he wrote that with the marshes at your feet, 'the wind in your face, the hawk on your fist, you may know that

you are, for a brief space, an heir of the ages. A minor page of history has turned back a thousand years.'

Trained hawks have a peculiar ability to conjure history because they are in a sense immortal. While individual hawks of different species die, the species themselves remain unchanged. There are no breeds or varieties, because hawks were never domesticated. The birds we fly today are identical to those of five thousand years ago. Civilisations rise and fall, but the hawks stay the same. This gives falconry birds the ability to feel like relics from the distant past. You take a hawk onto your fist. You imagine the falconer of the past doing the same. It is hard not to feel it is the same hawk.

I once asked my friends if they'd ever held things that gave them a spooky sense of history. *Ancient pots with three-thousand-year-old thumbprints in the clay*, said one. *Antique keys*, another. *Clay pipes. Dancing shoes from WWII. Roman coins I found in a field. Old bus tickets in second-hand books.* Everyone agreed that what these small things did was strangely intimate; they gave them the sense, as they picked them up and turned them in their fingers, of another person, an unknown person a long time ago, who had held that object in their hands. *You don't know anything about them, but you feel the other person's there*, one friend told me. *It's like all the years between you and them disappear. Like you become them, somehow.*

History collapses when you hold a hawk, just as it does for my friends with their small and precious objects. The vast differences between you and that long-dead person are forgotten. You cannot help but assume that they saw the world as you see it. And this has troubling ramifications. It is a small step from imagining you are the same as that long-dead falconer to presuming that the land you walk upon has been walked upon by people like you since time immemorial. And the ancestors falconers have chosen to imagine tend to have been a cut above the common crowd. 'Falconry is certainly of

high descent,' wrote the falconer Gage Earl Freeman in 1859. 'Look at the pride – the honest noble pride – of ancestry!' When a friend countered this by saying his own love for falconry was 'perfectly independent of any feeling for antiquity or the middle ages, for which he cared nothing', Freeman's response was blunt. 'I believe he was mistaken.' But hawks did not always grant you communion with lords and earls and kings. At Chapel Green a hawk let White feel part of the community of a pre-Reformation English village. It made him feel at home.

When I was small I'd loved falconry's historical glamour. I treasured it in the same way children treasure the hope that they might be like the children in books: secretly magical, part of some deeper, mysterious world that makes them something out of the ordinary. But that was a long time ago. I did not feel like that any more. I was not training a hawk because I wished to feel special. I did not want the hawk to make me feel I was striding righteously across the lands of my long-lost ancestors. I had no use for history, no use for time at all. I was training the hawk to make it all disappear.

Tonight I take Mabel further afield. We get to Midsummer Common at about eight o'clock and we wander right across it, past the redpoll cattle grazing hock-deep in thistles, stop by the cycle path along the south side of the river and sit ourselves down on a wooden bench under an alder tree. My feet are wet, cold, stinging with thistle scratches. I clench my toes into my sandals and watch the river slide. This side of the bank is all narrowboats and cyclists but the far bank is fronted with concrete slipways and college boathouses. And on the slipway opposite a man in a tracksuit is cleaning the bottom of an upended racing boat. Walkers pass, cyclists pass fast, and he and I seem the only people here. The cyclists and shoppers don't see me, they don't see the hawk, and they don't see the man with the boat. I watch him work with his rags and

bottles and his yellow bucket. Both he and I are concentrating our attentions on something important; both of us have a job to do. He has to clean and wax the shell of his boat, and I have to tame the hawk. Nothing else signifies. He wipes and waxes and polishes, and when this has been done to his satisfaction, the boat is shouldered and put back into the boathouse. He packs up the stuff on the slipway and leaves. Mabel doesn't care. She has something much more interesting to attend to: four mallards dabbling about in the grey water about twenty yards away. They float off in a little raft and we make our way home.

Now the light is thickening into real dusk and it starts to rain. And with the rain and the dusk comes the smell of autumn. It makes me shiver happily. But I have no idea what amazement is still to come. Because Mabel and I are about to witness an extraordinary phenomenon, an evening ritual I had no idea existed until today. Joggers! Like bats leaving their roost, their numbers build incrementally. First there are one or two, then a gap, then another one, and then three together. By the time Mabel and I are halfway home it feels as if we're in a nature documentary about the Serengeti. They are everywhere. Herds of them. They keep to the paths, though, which is good, because I can position myself and the hawk in a triangle of rough grass and chickweed just after the path splits into two. We stand there in the gloom and watch runners come up, split, and then stream past us. Of course they don't see us. We are motionless. 'Perhaps runners are like the dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park*,' I tell her. 'They can't see things that aren't moving.'

It is raining quite hard now, and the hawk's flat head is beaded with tiny gems of water that glow in the light from the sodium lamps. She balances on the balls of her feet, as she does when she's calm. Her pupils are wide and catlike in the dark. *What the hell*, I think. *She's jumped to the fist inside the house. I wonder if she'll do it out here.* Right next

to us is a wooden barrier enclosing a young lime sapling. I plonk her down on the top of the post, and she jumps, *blam*, just like that, leash-length from the post to my fist for food. With the wind blowing the wrong way, with rain in her eyes, with joggers thundering past us, she jumps three times, and then rouses, sending raindrops in a spray of metallic orange around us both. Brilliant.