lovereading.co.uk

If you love reading, you will love the unique services offered by lovereading.co.uk. You can download and print off the opening extracts of books, be guided by our exclusive author recommendation service and receive regular email updates of new books in your favourite genres. And it's all completely free. **Just turn to lovereading.co.uk today!**



Nature Cure

Richard Mabey

I

Flitting

I dwell on trifles like a child

I feel as ill becomes a man

And still my thoughts like weedlings wild

Grow up to blossom where they can.

John Clare, 'The Flitting'

IT'S OCTOBER, AN INDIAN summer. I'm standing on the threshold like some callow teenager, about to move house for the first time in my life. I've spent more than half a century in this place, in this undistinguished, comfortable town house on the edge of the Chiltern Hills, and had come to think we'd reached a pretty good accommodation. To have all mod cons on the doorstep of the quirkiest patch of countryside in south-east England had always seemed just the job for a rather solitary writing life. I'd use the house as a ground-base, and do my living in the woods, or in my head. I liked to persuade myself that the Chiltern landscape, with its folds and free-lines and constant sense of surprise, was what had shaped my prose, and maybe me too. But now I'm upping sticks and fleeing to the flatlands of East Anglia.

My past, or lack of it, had caught up with me. I'd been bogged down in the same place for too long, trapped by habits and memories. I was clotted with rootedness. And in the end I'd fallen ill and run out of words. My Irish grandfather, a day-worker who rarely stayed in one house long enough to

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey
Published by Chatto & Windus

pay the rent, knew what to do at times like this. In that word that catches all the shades of escape, from the young bird's flutter from the nest to the dodging of someone in trouble, he'd flit.

Yet hovering on the brink of this belated initiation, all I can do is think back again, to another wrenching journey. It had been a few summers before, when I was just beginning to slide into a state of melancholy and senselessness that were incomprehensible to me. I was due to go for a holiday in the Cevennes with some old friends, a few weeks in the limestone causses that had become something of a tradition, but could barely summon up enough spirit to leave home. Somehow I made it, and the Cevennes were, for that brief respite, as healing as ever, a time of sun and hedonism and companionship.

But towards the end of my stay something happened which lodged in my mind like a primal memory: a glimpse of another species' rite of passage. I'd travelled south to the Herault for a couple of days, and stayed overnight with my friends in a crooked stone house in Octon. In the morning we came across a fledgling swift beached in the attic. It had fallen out of the nest and lay with its crescent wings stretched out stiffly, unable to take off. Close to, its juvenile plumage wasn't the enigmatic black of those careering midsummer silhouettes, but a marbled mix of charcoal-grey and brown and powder-white. And we could see the price it paid for being so exquisitely adapted to a life that would be spent almost entirely in the air. Its prehensile claws, four facing to the front, were mounted on little more than feathered stumps, half-way down its body. We picked it up, carried it to the window and hurled it out. It was just six weeks old, and having its maiden flight and first experience of another species all in the same moment.

But whatever its emotions, they were overtaken by instinct and natural bravura. It went into a downward slide, winnowing furiously, skimmed so close to the road that we all gasped, and then flew up strongly towards the south-east. It would not touch down again until it came back to breed in two summers' time. How many miles is that? How many wing-beats? How much time off?

I tried to imagine the journey that lay ahead of it, the immense odyssey along a path never flown before, across chronic war-zones and banks of Mediterranean gunmen, through precipitous changes of weather and landscape. Its parents and siblings had almost certainly left already. It would be flying the 6,000 miles entirely on its own, on a course mapped out - or at least sketched out - deep in its central nervous system. Every one of its senses would be helping to guide it, checking its progress against genetic memories, generating who knows what astonishing experiences of consciousness. Maybe, like many seabirds, it would be picking up subtle changes in air-borne particles as it passed over seas and aromatic shrubland and the dusty thermals above African townships. It might be riding a magnetic trail detected by iron-rich cells in its forebrain. It would almost certainly be using, as navigation aids, landmarks whose shapes fitted templates in its genetic memories, and the sun too, and, on clear nights, the big constellations - which, half-way through its journey, would be replaced by a quite different set in the night sky of the southern hemisphere. Then,

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey

after three or four weeks, it would arrive in South Africa and earn its reward of nine months of unadulterated, aimless flying and playing. Come the following May, it and all the other first-year birds would come back to Europe and race recklessly about the sky just for the hell of it. That is what swifts do. It is their ancestral, unvarying destiny for the non-breeding months. But you would need to have a very sophisticated view of pleasure to believe they weren't also 'enjoying' themselves.

When that May came round I was blind to the swifts for the first time in my life. While they were en fête I was lying on my bed with my face away from the window, not really caring if I saw them again or not. In a strange and ironic turn-about, I had become the incomprehensible creature adrift in some insubstantial medium, out of kilter with the rest of creation. It didn't occur to me at the time, but maybe that is the way our whole species is moving.

*

So, about to become a first-time migrant myself, I can't get that fledgling swift out of my mind. This sudden swoop out of the nest and into the huge skies of East Anglia isn't something I've chosen or planned. Maybe some long-postponed maturation programme is guiding me, but it feels more like a cascade of dice-throws. To put it briefly, for now: I came to a kind of 'finish' in my work (but certainly not in the rest of my 'business'), drifted into a long and deep depression, couldn't work, used up most of my money, fell out with my sister - my house-mate - and had to sell the family home. Coming through was just as serendipitous. I was rescued by friends and slowly renovated, like an antique typewriter. I fell in love and started to write again, though with no idea of what I wanted to say. Then I caught a chance, as casually and as unexpectedly as one might a breeze. A couple of rooms in a friend's farmhouse happened to become vacant in East Anglia, which I'd seen as my second home since I was a teenager. Roofless and jobless, I jumped, and started again.

Now, packing the car, I feel like a tabula rasa, stripped down and open for offers. Even my belongings are, in both senses, spare. (I don't, for instance, have a single cooking utensil, telling myself they'll be 'provided' or at least available in my new habitat.) I have the tools of a trade whose survival value is debatable: a couple of manual typewriters and a drawerful of office gadgetry. But beyond that, my baggage is strictly sentimental. It includes a crystal of melon amethyst from Zambia, given to me for luck by my companion Poppy. A Victorian brass microscope, magnification approximately 100x. A picnic hamper full of elegant willow-pattern plates and cups, too posh ever to have been used. A badge inscribed with 'Cat Lovers Against The Bomb'. A sizeable chunk of the 1,500-year-old Selborne yew, which I have clung onto since it was blown down in 1990, convincing myself that I'm just waiting for the 'right carver'. Mum's favourite book, John Moore's The Waters Under the Earth (which if I'm right about the East Anglian landscape, may soon be mine too), with the Oxendale's catalogue order form she used as a bookmark. Emblems and fossils. I might just have well packed a pair of man-sized crescent wings for all the use these romantic knick-knacks will be. And as for books, I've sifted out a couple of hundred

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey

essential volumes (including most of John Clare) and sent the rest into storage in an industrial container somewhere up the Great North Road.

What a way to start a new life. I don't think I'm in denial, or 'downsizing'. This baggage, condensed into a few boxes in the back of a jeep, is actually all I want, and, to tell the truth, all there will be room for where I'm going. But I can't avoid the hugeness of change. This move is the thing I've been scared of all my life: the rite of cutting the cord, leaving the nest, spreading one's wings. It's a process so universal that we scarcely ever refer to it except in metaphors from nature. The only problem is that I've postponed it for a ridiculous and unnaturally long time.

Yet now the moment of severance has arrived, I'm feeling oddly elated and, for a dare on myself, I drive past the old house. The new owner's grandmother and her grandchildren are strolling round the garden, inspecting the remains of my old roses. It's odd staring at a scene which I've enacted so many times myself, both as a child and an adult, and knowing that I'll never make that ritual beating of the bounds again. Yet I don't feel in the least bit unreal, or as if I'm having an out-of-the-body experience, gazing in at my past like this. It seems instead almost a comforting image, of a kind of bequeathing.

It's a bright, balmy October day and feels more like the beginning of a summer holiday than a rite of passage. The fields, just free of a sharp frost, look burnished under the sun. Near Royston, a flock of lapwings, migrating south, veer over the road, and I remember the last time I saw them at a moment of change, a brief glimpse then, as now, of transience. I'd been up on Shap Fell with the photographer Tony Evans, searching for bird's-eye primroses, and the lapwings had flown - that loose, wavering flight, like windblown paper - over the honey-coloured pastures exactly above the point where we found the flowers. It was a sign of the year's turning and the last stages of a book we had worked on together for six years.

Only one thing sours the day. Somewhere back in my old home town there is a funeral pyre of the family furniture. It was of no value, just sensible, utility stuff our parents had bought for their first house. They were migrants themselves. Born and bred in London, they had premonitions of war and had headed west to make a home in the market town of Berkhamsted in the Chilterns. Sixty years later the pieces they had put together and with which we'd lived contentedly had become so much lumber. The house clearance firms refused them, and would not take them away even for cash. A charity furniture recycling centre ('sorry we don't take messages' said its messaging service) was dismissive. So most of it went on the fire, shouldered out of the house in a hurry by friends. The evening after it went was the only time my sister and I broke down. Between us we had 110 years of dwelling here, and sitting in the empty and echoing dining-room, with just one chair between us, was like being orphaned, or losing one of your senses. Because it wasn't the bare shell of the house that held the memories of the place, but its material things, the ordinary currency of living. The sideboard, whose top was already worn into hollows by two generations of fingers. The low, battered wicker chair on which Mum had nursed all four of her children. A cast-iron money-boxturned- doorstop in the form of an owl ('PAT.SEPT 21 &

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey

28 1880') which for fifty years had tripped up everyone who came through the sitting-room door. 'Mind the owl' rang round the house, every time. Things become a kind of external memory, an embodiment of events and feelings.

My road east has that sort of engrained feeling too. I've been travelling it since I was a teenager and its swerves and shifts of character have become old familiars to me. When I first started to travel to the coast with a group of friends in the early 1960s, there was a precise point where we believed East Anglia began. Just out of Baldock, about 30 miles north-east of the Chilterns, we turned into the route of the neolithic road known as the Icknield Way. We passed a handsome Victorian maltings (now demolished). In front of us was a vista of sweeping chalky fields and a sky full of larks, and the modest prospects of the Home Counties seemed irrevocably behind us. It was a kind of portal, the point we knew we were finally 'away'. East Anglia spread before us like the awkward corners of a room that no one bothers to sweep, and we took to referring to it as 'the Ankle'.

Beyond Newmarket, the Icknield Way crosses the region known as Breckland, the dry heart of the region. Breckland is a 400-square-mile bowl of chalky sands. The thinness of the soil meant that the natural woodland cover was easy to clear, and for a while this was the most densely inhabited area of prehistoric Britain. The early farmers practised slash-and-burn agriculture, growing crops for a few seasons and then allowing the barely fertile land to 'go back' for twenty or so years. These briefly cultivated, 'broken' plots were known as brecks, and gave the region its name.

The sandy soils could barely sustain even this light cultivation, and when rabbits, and then sheep, moved in, the vegetation over much of Breckland became sparse. Up till the nineteenth century it was pretty much a dust-bowl, a wilderness of blown sand, and was so desolate that travellers used to cross this 'vast Arabian desert' at dawn, to avoid upsetting the horses. There was even an inland lighthouse to guide anyone who became benighted. The diarist John Evelyn wrote that 'the Travelling Sands have so damaged the country, rolling from place to place, and quite over-whelmed some gentlemen's estates' and he urged them to plant 'tufts of firr' to stabilise the sand. The gentlemen of East Anglia didn't need much encouragement, and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Breckland was tamed, ploughed and enclosed. The only reminders of its old wild spirit are the occasional dust-devils that rise in the carrot fields and duck-ranches and blow across the lanes, and the lines of hunchbacked, windbreak pines that were planted and laid to keep the sand in its place. (This mutability is the subject of a classically stoical local joke. 'What county's your farm in?' 'That depends on which way the wind blows. Sometimes thas in Norfolk, sometimes in Suffolk.' This is East Anglia's creation myth: a world built on shifting sands.)

What's left of Breckland has, like so much so-called wasteland, become the dumping ground for the kind of land-uses that people don't want near their settlements. It's the site of nuclear strike airbases, the 25 square miles of the Ministry of Defence's Stanford Practical Training Area, and the earliest Forestry Commision conifer plantations - a new generation of 'tufts of firr'.

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey
Published by Chatto & Windus

Moving across this arid, sandy heart of East Anglia you are travelling through not just superficial changes in the scenery, but whole strata of shifting cultural attitudes towards the land. Breckland's sense of barrenness, of isolation, has made it into a kind of frontierland, and what hasn't been written off as institutional wasteland, has been staked out, appropriated as a private playground. North of Bury the big estates are dedicated these days to horse-ranching or pheasant-rearing, and throughout the autumn and winter, you must drive willy-nilly over carpets of squashed, battery-reared birds that were quite unprepared for life in the wild.

Only the flints are constant, dogging your route and their chalk motherlode all the way to the north Norfolk coast. They're scattered uncountably in the fields, and built into the fabric of this whole swath of England: in cottages, walls, churches (round or flat side to the sun, depending on the district) and in multitudes of knapped artefacts found in the fields - arrowheads, axes, grinders, and the prototype, pear-shaped, all-purpose crunchers and cutters known as 'coups de poings'. The mine where the finest of them were dug, Grimes Graves near Thetford, is only 20 miles from where I'm headed.

We used to walk barefoot on flints for dares when we were kids, and this run through eastern England - over the sharp stones towards the sea - has always seemed a natural extension of childhood play. But today, instead of heading for the coast as usual, I take an unfamiliar route towards the region's heartland. South and east of Norwich are the rivers Waveney, Bure and Yare. For thousands of years, as the level of the North Sea rose and fell, they periodically flooded the region, and turned much of it into a swamp. A great fen stretched all the way from the brackish marshland of the three rivers' common estuary at Yarmouth, inland for maybe 40 miles, right up to the edge of the Breckland sands. A swamp of reed, lagoons and sagging alder woods, seething with life, with spoonbills, ospreys, cranes and otters, and creatures like pelicans and beavers that are now just memories. Even the human inhabitants had to be amphibious, and in the most waterlogged places they built their houses on raised platforms and walked about on swampland equivalents of snow-shoes called 'pawts'. In the east, during a spell when the water table was comparatively low, the locals dug extensive peat mines in the river valleys - which flooded to form the Broads when the sea-level rose again. To the west, where the three rivers rise, the fens and wet valleys were also mined, but were smaller and more isolated. One of these, the Upper Waveney Valley, is to be my future home.

*

Turning down that road less travelled, I can't any longer duck the questions which have been so unsettling me for the past few months - and in a more general form, I suppose, for much of my life. Where do I belong? What's my role? How, in social, emotional, ecological terms, do I find a way of fitting?

Back in the Chilterns I saw my home as a mooring, an emotional refuge, but used it as casually as if it were an old coat. Outside was where the real business was, either in the landscape itself or, metaphorically, in books. Living the free-range life of a writer, I skimmed about the countryside where and when I liked, following my own footsteps or taking off somewhere utterly

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey

unknown, hiding-up or socialising when the weather was bad, and avoiding heavily farmed countryside like a plague. I was a scrap of nomadic tissue, a kind of mobile epiphyte - an organism without its own roots - living on the land rather than in it, and letting others bother about my infrastructure. And like an epiphyte I was lost when my substrate started to collapse. I was, quite simply, too specialised, and didn't have the flexibility and confidence to cope with changes in my niche.

Up in the East Anglian borderlands I know I'm going to have to confront the daily realities of country life in a way I never have before. The weather, for a start. In Norfolk it comes famously straight from the Urals - and in an old house, I've no doubt, straight down the drive and in through every door, window and penetrable cranny. So, I guess, will big farming. The valley itself is a narrow tunnel of wildness. But I'm under no illusions about what lies beyond. East Anglia is the most intensively farmed region in Europe, and agriculture comes right up to three sides of the house. There is not what I would call a wood within 5 miles. Instead there will be rape and sugar-beet prairies, battery farms, condominiums of silos, battues of pheasants and pesticide drift.

And beyond finding a modus vivendi with farming I wonder how I'm going to cope with this bare and quintessentially watery place. I've spent most of my life under the cover of trees, and the rhythms of the woodland year have been a kind of metronome: that burst of brilliance and energy in the spring, the long, dense trance of summer, the sumptuous fading-away of the autumn, the clean, bare months of winter, the season of working and cutting back. I reckoned I could always lose myself in a wood, not just in its spaces, but in the layers of history bound up in its grain and forkings and slow cycles of light and shade. A wood's aura of history seems to go back not just beyond what generations of humans have done to it, but beyond civilisation altogether. The forest, the wildwood, is the nature we think we have, in both senses, 'grown out of', and in woods you have always the feel of 'going back'. They are places of long memory, and resilience.

What the sense of wildness will be like in my new surroundings is something I'll discover. But I've seen enough of wet places to know that they can be mercurial and unpredictable. By contrast with the cryptic, measured rhythms of woods, they have a vividness and immediacy, a sense that they might at any moment turn into something else. Very often they do. The wet is older than the wood, but it is the domain of the present, and sometimes, it feels, of the future.

The wood and the water, the ancient and the opportunist, are, I suspect, the two poles of natural rhythms. Life begins in the water and reaches its full maturity in the forest - and then it all goes round again. I think, greedily, that I'd like a bit of both, to become amphibious myself and to see that woodland high moment, spring, acted out in a swamp. But I wonder if I've got the stomach to live that much more intimately with any kind of wild. As unfamiliar creatures crowd into my new territory (and me into theirs) and as I try to adjust to hard-bitten ideas about utility and productivity, what will happen to my sense of the value and meaning of nature? Is hoping for a relationship that transcends the functional futile in such circumstances? In

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey

fact is the idea of a 'relationship' just playing with words, since nature seems not to have the slightest interest in having one with me? Should I settle instead for the time-honoured role of local naturalist, check out the birds at the garden feeders and try to add a few plant species to the county lists? Aspire to be a clerk of the records?

I said that this edgy baptism - which looks like being a real dunk in water - is about finding my place. Yet the whole business - fitting in, sharing territory, discovering a niche, making, with luck, a contribution, and trying to do it all with a modicum of grace and inventiveness (the ingredients of what I understand by wildness) - looks uncannily like the challenge our species is facing as it tries to find its own settlement in nature. The difference is that, ecologically and globally, we're bucking the whole emotional aspect of that settlement. So often we're lectured that the great environmental crises of our time are just problems of household management writ large. If we're less greedy, stop breeding, budget our energy use, recycle our waste, make compost, then everything will be fine. What a hope! Who could ever run a house (if we must use that bossy, domestic metaphor) while ignoring the unquantifiable tastes and habits, the needs and motivations of all its occupants? The list of our disastrous failures, from forest obliteration and oceanic pollution to the raising of the extinction rate a thousandfold, bears all the marks of a species which no longer believes itself to be part of the animal world at all. We're becoming unearthly, freed, we like to think, from the physical imperatives of nature by technology, and exiled from its sensuality and immediacy by our self-awareness. Our role on the planet is compromised less by our power than by this arrogance, and the belief that our particular brand of consciousness makes us uniquely privileged as a species, entitled to evaluate and manage the lives of all the others on our own terms.

I've seen this high-mindedness close-to, and not been above it myself. I said earlier that I'd grown up under cover of woods. But it was more than that. For twenty years I had a wood of my own, to the extent that anyone can possess a wild community, a whole place. In that time I went through all the rites of property ownership, turning from inveterate trespasser to fence-keeper and fastidious surveyor, and ending up as dispossessed as all property owners eventually are. The upheaval my illness caused had brought my relationship with the wood to crisis point. I had no stomach to be an absentee landlord, and, to be frank, needed the capital tied up in it. I was having to sell up, and felt bitter and guilty and not at all resigned to it.

I'd bought Hardings Wood, a 16-acre patch of ancient forest 800 feet up, near the village of Wigginton in the Chilterns, back in the early 1980s, and for two decades it had been the apple of my eye. I'd wanted to set up a community wood project and free-up what had been a dark and private timber-lot for the benefit of the local community, of all species. It had been, in those terms, a spectacular success. Half the village had worked or walked in it. Extravagant sheets of woodland flowers and self-sown trees flourished in the light, and a dynasty of badgers spread through a network of catacombs below. A new consciousness of the wood as a landmark, a place of both dense history and great presence, began to take root in the area. But now, numb at the thought of losing it, I wasn't admitting a lot of other, more

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey

personal business. For me it had also been a playground and a stage. I'd written about its bluebells and the Ascension Day celebrations held there when they were in full flower. I'd been filmed wielding a chain-saw with criminal abandon. Above all, I'd used it as an immense private library of experiences and encounters.

It had been a lesson in social relations, too. I learned, intimately for the first time, the extent to which the ethos of property permeates our relationships with the natural world. I took down one lot of fences to let the public in but had to put up another lot to keep my neighbours' animals out. I crossed my fingers and signed up to 'control' grey squirrels in order to get a government grant. I banned the hunt after it assumed it had the right to ride through the wood and kill foxes that I knew as individuals. Every time someone appropriated the place or its inhabitants as their property, I retorted in some feeble reflex, that they were mine.

Once I had my own enthusiastic largesse thrown back at me. A new road was scheduled to come through the wooded valleys where I'd played as a child, and pass within 550 yards of Hardings. I gave evidence at the public inquiry and mentioned, among other things, the colonies of bankside wood anemones that might be lost to the road. The counsel for the highways authority pounced. Hadn't I written about the anemones in my wood, put on record how abundant and luxuriant they were? How could the roadside flowers be of any value at all when the species was, by my own account, so common nearby? The lawyer wasn't being particularly devious. He was using the same argument about value employed as a matter of course by conservationists: plants aren't important in themselves, but only as representatives of a species. Their significance increases only as they become endangered. To care about individuals and the complex relations they have with their intimate surroundings and local ecosystems (the only relationships that matter to the wild things themselves, after all), is to be accused of being subjective or, worse, sentimental.

It's here that I have to jump ship. I've never been able to fit my feelings about nature into this kind of value system, weighing its usefulness and scarcity value like some kind of commodity dealer. I like common things, and the idea of commonality - 'a Council of all Beings'. I find it hard to think of nature as purely a human resource, even though I know I physically depend on it, and harder still to perceive the non-human world objectively, as an 'object', when I know it has its own subjective tasks and goals, independent of yet permeating ours. And why should we try to be neutrals, when we are so inextricably and passionately involved?

And worse, I am sentimental. I talk to birds. I mark much of my sense of time and place with odd moments and fragments of the non-human world. I have a drink for the first swallow, keep a tape somewhere of a nightingale I recorded in a thick fog to play down the phone to a far-away girlfriend. I'm touched by the durability of these seasonal encounters, yet also by those moments when nature is breaking the rules, freeing itself from our tidy categories and timetables, being independent, unpredictable, sassy, making things anew. Both kinds of experience seem to me varieties of 'wildness', and far removed from the predictability of a manmanaged world. One, of the

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey

deep, encoded, learned-experience of evolution; the other, of newness, invention, individuality, of the renewal of spring and the indulgence of play - yet of random pain and catastrophe, too.

Copyright © 2005 Richard Mabey
Published by Chatto & Windus