Nests

When I was small, I decided I wanted to be a naturalist. And so I slowly amassed a nature collection, and arranged it across my bedroom sills and shelves as a visible display of all the small expertises I'd gathered from the pages of books. There were galls, feathers, seeds, pine cones, loose single wings of small tortoiseshells or peacock butterflies picked from spiders' webs; the severed wings of dead birds, spread and pinned on to cardboard to dry; the skulls of small creatures; pellets – tawny owl, barn owl, kestrel – and old birds' nests. One was a chaffinch nest I could balance in the palm of my hand, a thing of horsehair and moss, pale scabs of lichen and moulted pigeon feathers; another was a song-thrush nest woven of straw and soft twigs with a flaking inner cup moulded from clay. But those nests never felt as if they fitted with the rest of my beloved collection. It wasn't that they conjured the passing of time, of birds flown, of life in death. Those intuitions are something you learn to feel much later in life. It was partly because they made me feel an emotion I couldn't name, and mostly because I felt I shouldn't possess them at all. Nests were all about eggs, and eggs were something I knew I shouldn't ever collect. Even when I came across a white half-shell picked free of twigs by a pigeon and dropped on a lawn, a moral imperative stilled my hand. I could never bring myself to take it home.

Naturalists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries routinely collected birds' eggs, and most children who grew

up in semi-rural or rural surroundings in the 1940s and '50s have done it too. 'We only used to take one from each nest,' a woman friend told me, abashed. 'Everyone did it.' It's simply an accident of history that people two decades older than me have nature knowledges I do not possess. So many of them, having spent their childhoods bird's-nesting, still see a furze bush and think, *Linnet*, and can't help but assess the ability of last year's laid hedge to hold a chaffinch or robin's nest. They possess different wordless intuitions from me, ones relating to how one holds the landscape between head and eye and heart and hand. In my own history of the countryside, nests weren't things that were made to be found. They were carefully maintained blind spots, redacted lines in familiar texts. But even so, they had special salience when I was very young. For children, woods and fields and gardens are full of discrete, magical places: tunnels and dens and refuges in which you can hide and feel safe. I knew, when I was small, what nests were about. They were secrets.

I followed the flights of blackbirds and tits and thrushes and nuthatches through my garden. And every spring their nests changed how I felt about home. To have the presence of these birds shrunk down to that one point of attachment, the nest, made me anxious. It raised questions of vulnerability, made me worry about predatory crows and cats; made the garden a place of threat, not safety. Though I never searched for nests, I'd find them all the same. I'd be sitting at the kitchen window eating a bowl of Weetabix and I'd spot a dunnock flit into the forsythia, a mouse-sized bird, all streaks and spots and whispers. I knew I should look away, but I'd hold my breath at my transgression and track the almost imperceptible movement of leaves as the disappeared bird hopped up and across through twigs to its nest. Then I'd see the blur of wings as the bird slipped free of the hedge and was gone. And once I'd determined where it was, and saw that the adults were gone, I needed to know. Most of the

nests I found were higher than my head, so I'd reach my hand up and curl my fingers until their tips touched what might be warm, glossy smoothness. Or the unbearable fragility of small flesh. I knew I was an intruder. Nests were like bruises: things I couldn't help but touch, even though I didn't want them to be there. They challenged everything that birds meant for me. I loved them most because they seemed free. Sensing danger, sensing a trap, sensing any kind of imposition, they could fly away. Watching birds, I felt I shared in their freedom. But nests and eggs tied birds down. They made them vulnerable.

The old books on birds that lined my childhood shelves described nests as 'bird homes'. This confused me. How could a nest be a home? Back then I thought of homes as fixed, eternal, dependable refuges. Nests were not like that: they were seasonal secrets to be used and abandoned. But then birds challenged my understanding of the nature of home in so many ways. Some spent the year at sea, or entirely in the air, and felt earth or rock beneath their feet only to make nests and lay eggs that tied them to land. This was all a deeper mystery. It was a story about the way lives should go that was somehow like – but not anything like – the one I'd been handed as a child. You grow up, you get married, you get a house, you have children. I didn't know where birds fitted into all this. I didn't know where I did. It was a narrative that even then gave me pause.

I think differently of home now: it's a place you carry within you, not simply a fixed location. Perhaps birds taught me that, or took me some of the way there. Some birds' nests are homes because they seem indivisible from the birds that make them. Rooks are rookeries – birds of feathers and bone that are also massed assemblages of twigs in February trees. House martins peering from the entrances of their nests under summer gables are beings of wings and mouths and eyes but also all the architecture of gathered mud. But some

birds' nests seem so far from nests at all that the word itself drifts and almost loses purchase. The form of one such nest is: chips of old rock and bones and hardened guano, where the overhang supplies shade. The form of another is: a raft of weeds that rises and falls with the ebb and flow of water. Another: a dark space under roof tiles where you can crawl on your mouse feet and your wings drag like feathered blades the colour of carbon steel. Peregrine. Grebe. Swift.

Nests increasingly fascinate me. These days I wonder about how they seem to be one kind of entity when they contain eggs and a different kind of entity when they contain chicks. How nests and eggs are good things to think about when considering matters of individuality, and the concepts of same, and different, and series. How the form of a nest is part of the phenotype of a particular bird species, but how local conditions foster beautiful idiosyncrasies. How we humans are intrigued when birds make nests out of things that belong to us: house finches lining their nests with cigarette butts, nests of Bullock's orioles fashioned from twine, kites decorating their tree platforms with underwear stolen from washing lines. A friend of mine found a ferruginous hawk's nest wrought almost entirely from lengths of wire. It's satisfying to consider the incorporation of human detritus into the creations of birds, but it is troubling, too. What have they made out of what we have made of this world? Our world intersects with theirs and our habitations are strangely shared. We have long rejoiced at birds building nests in unusual places. We love the robin rearing chicks in an old teapot, a hen blackbird sitting tightly on a nest tucked above the stop bulb on a traffic light: these are nests that gesture towards hope, as birds use our things for their own ends, making our technologies redundant, slowed down, static, full of meaning that is no longer entirely our own.

But that is what nests are. Their meaning is always woven from things that are partly bird and partly human, and as

the cup or wall of a nest is raised, it raises, too, questions about our own lives. Do birds plan like us, or think like us, or really know how to make knots, or slap beaks full of mud in series, or is this merely instinct? Does the structure they're making begin with some abstract form, a mental image, to which the bird plans, rather than thinking, step by step, *There, that is where that goes*? These are questions that pull on us. We make things according to plans, but all of us also have that sense of where things should go. We feel it when we arrange objects on mantelpieces, or furniture in rooms. Artists feel it when they construct collages, when they sculpt, when they bring pigment to bear on a surface, knowing that the dark smear of paint just here provides or provokes a sense of balance or conflict when viewed in relation to the other marks upon the scene. What is it in us? We are fascinated by the difference between skill and instinct, just as we police the differences between art and craft. If pigment is smeared on to a guillemot's eggshell as it rotates before being laid in drip-splashes that resemble in their exuberance and finesse the paintings of Abstract Expressionists, what is our delight in those patterns saying about us? I think of that need to collect that sometimes is billionaires hoarding de Koonings and Pollocks and sometimes tradesmen hiding plastic margarine tubs full of exquisitely marked red-backed shrike eggs beneath beds and floorboards.

We see our own notions of home and family in the creatures around us; we process and consider and judge, and prove the truth of our own assumptions back to us from a hall of twigs and mud and shells and feathered mirrors. In science, too, the questions we ask are commonly woven this way. I think of Niko Tinbergen's eminence in the field of ethology – and remember, too, his patient attention to the way ritualised gestures appeased aggression in colonies of nesting gulls, and how they related to his anxieties about the relationship between overcrowded cities and human

violence. I think of the young Julian Huxley, full of all the sexual confusion of youth, spending one spring watching the courtship of great crested grebes, speculating on mutual sexual selection and ritualised behaviour. And I see interwar anxieties about marriage in Henry Eliot Howard's work on bird behaviour; he puzzles over the concept of territory, of nest building, of extra-pair copulations, and is desperately keen to understand the reasons behind the sexual attractiveness of particular females who lure males from their established mates. And, in literature, too, everywhere. Nesting birds naturalising the English class system in T. H. White's *The Once and Future King*, where seabird-nesting cliffs of auks and kittiwakes make 'an innumerable crowd of fish-wives on the largest grandstand in the world', exclaiming phrases like 'Is me hat on straight?' and 'Crikey, this isn't 'arf a do!' while White's skeins of aristocratic pink-footed geese pass high over the slum, singing Scandinavian goose-themed sagas as they fly north.

Friends of mine who grew up in marginal rural communities mostly have little truck with the mainstream rules of nature appreciation and the laws that enforce them. Most of them hunt with longdogs. Some of them are poachers. Some have collected eggs. Some of them probably still do, though I don't get to hear about that. Most have limited financial or social capital, and their claim on the landscape around them is through local field knowledge, rather than literal possession. Egg collecting in this tradition makes me wonder about the terms of ownership, investment and access to pleasure that economically deprived communities are allowed to have in the natural world. I think of Billy, the boy in Barry Hines' *A Kestrel for a Knave*, who refuses to play football, refuses to work down the mine, rejects all the models of masculinity he's given. What opportunities for tenderness does he have? He strokes the backs of baby thrushes in their nest. He keeps a kestrel that he loves. What kinds of beauties

can be possessed? If you are a landowner, you get the whole compass of the watered-silk sky and the hedges and the livestock and everything in it. But if you're a factory worker? There's the rub. Egg collecting requires skill, bravery in the field, hard-won knowledge of the natural world. It can become an obsession for minds gripped with stilled beauty. It is a practice that halts time. The collectors grant themselves the power to withhold new lives and new generations. And egg collecting is also, at the same time, one in the eye for the elite and all their rules about what is and what is not an acceptable way to relate to nature.

Egg collecting was especially derided in the cultures of natural history operating during and after the Second World War. At that time, British birds were laden with new significance. They were what the nation was made of, what we were fighting for. In this milieu, species with a perilous foothold on British soil, such as avocets, little ringed plovers and ospreys, had their rarity bound up with imperilled nationhood. Thus, the theft of their eggs was seen as an act akin to treason. And protecting the birds from the depredations of collectors seemed analogous to military service. Again and again, in books and films of this period, injured servicemen who have proved their bravery on the field of battle now show their love for their country by protecting rare birds trying to raise families. 1949's *The Awl Birds* by J. K. Stanford, for example, where the threatened nest belongs to avocets, or Kenneth Allsop's *Adventure Lit Their Star*, published the same year, where it belongs to little ringed plovers. The historian of science Sophia Davis has written on how the villains of these books are egg collectors, routinely described as 'vermin' and 'a menace to England', and how the nests in their pages are guarded by heroes with the fate of the nation close to their heart. Indeed, gangs of egg protectors guarding the nests of rare birds were a true-life legacy of the war. After years in a German POW camp, the

ornithologist George Waterston sat with his colleagues by the first Scottish osprey nest for fifty years and kept it under observation through the telescopic sights of rifles. And in the 1950s, J. K. Stanford wrote of his own experiences guarding avocets. 'Keyed up by the general air of secrecy,' he reminisced, 'we sat till long after dusk, prepared for anything, even an amphibious raid by armed oologists.' Egg collectors today tend to be seen as beings in the grip of hopeless addiction, simultaneously suffering from great moral failings. These characterisations were firmly codified in the cultures of post-war ornithology as threats to the body politic.

Eggs and war; possession and hope and home. In the 1990s, years after my natural historical collection was disassembled and my childhood home was gone, I worked at a falcon-breeding centre in Wales. In one room were banks of expensive incubators containing falcon eggs. Through the glass, their shells were the mottled browns of walnut, of tea-stains, of onion skins. This was before the advent of newer incubators that mimic the press of a brood patch through hot air-filled plastic pouches. These were forced-air incubators with eggs on wire racks. We weighed them each day, and as the embryo moved towards hatching, we'd candle them: place them on a light and scribe the outline of the shadow against the bright air-cell with a soft graphite pencil, so that as the days passed the eggshell was ringed with repeated lines that resembled tides or wide-grained wood. But I always left the incubation room feeling unaccountably upset, with a vague, disquieting sense of vertigo. It was a familiar emotion I couldn't quite name. I finally worked out what it was one rainy Sunday afternoon. Leafing through my parents' albums I found a photograph of me a few days after my birth, a frail and skinny thing, one arm ringed with a medical bracelet and bathed in stark electric light. I was in an incubator, for I was exceedingly premature. My twin brother did not survive his birth. And that early loss, followed

by weeks of white light lying alone on a blanket in a Perspex box, had done something wrong to me that echoed with a room full of eggs in forced-air boxes, held in moist air and moved by wire. Now I could put a name to the upset I felt. It was loneliness.

That was when I recognised the particular power of eggs to raise questions of human hurt and harm. That was why, I realised, the nests in my childhood collection made me uncomfortable; they reached back to a time in my life when the world was nothing but surviving isolation. And then. And then there was a day. One day when, quite by surprise, I discovered that if I held a falcon egg close to my mouth and made soft clucking noises, a chick that was ready to hatch would call back. And there I stood, in the temperature-controlled room. I spoke through the shell to something that had not yet known light or air, but would soon take in the revealed coil and furl of a west-coast breeze and cloud of a hillside in one easy glide at sixty miles an hour, and spire up on sharp wings to soar high enough to see the distant, glittering Atlantic. I spoke through an egg and wept.

Nothing Like a Pig

I'm baffled. My boyfriend and I are standing up against a short barbed-wire fence shaded by sweet chestnut leaves. Woods are quiet in autumn: just the sifting hush of a small wind above and a robin making dripping-water noises from a holly bush.

I'm not quite sure what to expect because I'm not sure why I'm here. The boy said he'd show me something I'd never seen before in the woods, which made me raise an eyebrow. But here we are. He whistles and calls, whistles again. Nothing happens. Then it happens: a short, collapsing moment as sixty or seventy yards away something walks fast between trees, and then the boar. The boar. The boar.

When I saw *Jurassic Park* in the cinema something unexpected happened when the first dinosaur came on screen: I felt a huge, hopeful pressure in my chest and my eyes filled with tears. It was miraculous: a thing I'd seen representations of since I was a child had come alive. Something like that was happening now and it was just as affecting. I've seen pictures of boars all my life: razor-backed beasts on Greek pottery, sixteenth-century woodcuts, trophy photographs of twenty-first-century hunters kneeling over them with rifles, ink drawings of the Erymanthian boar in my book of Greek legends. There are animals that are mythological by virtue of being imaginary: basilisks, dragons, unicorns. There are animals that were once just as mythologically rich, but have

had so much exposure to us now that their earlier meanings have become swamped with new ones: lions, tigers, cheetahs, leopards, bears. They've been given modern stories. For me, boars still exist inside those older stories, are still emblematic, still rich and passing strange. And now here one was, called into the real world.

This creature was not what I expected, despite its slap of familiarity. It had the forward-menacing shoulders of a baboon and the brute strength and black hide of a bear. But it was not really anything like a bear, and what surprised me most of all was that it was nothing like a pig. As the beast trotted up to us, a miracle of muscle and bristle and heft, I turned to the boy, and said, surprised, 'It's nothing like a pig!' With great satisfaction he grinned and said, 'No. They're really not.'

For the first time in centuries, free-roaming wild boars are thriving in British woods, descendants of animals bred for meat that escaped from captivity or were released on purpose. Adaptable and resilient, wild boars are also increasing in number across continental Europe and in places far from their natural range, which spans Eurasia from Britain to Japan. From the first introduction of boars to New Hampshire in the 1890s, boar-like wild pigs have now been reported in at least forty-five states in the United States. In Britain, they have strongholds in Sussex, Kent and the Forest of Dean in Gloucestershire, an ancient hunting preserve that stood in for an alien planet in the movie *The Force Awakens*. Sixty farm-reared animals were secretly and illegally dumped there in 2004; eleven years later, night-time thermal-imaging surveys suggested the population has grown to more than a thousand.

I lived near the forest some years ago and I went looking for them. My motives were more than just natural-historical curiosity: their presence made me feel I was stepping into something like the wildwood of ancient times. I never saw them, but I did come across signs of their presence: deep ruts

and broken ground on woodland paths and grassy roadsides where they'd rooted for food. Boars are landscape engineers that alter the ecology of their woodlands. Wallowing holes fill with rainwater and become ponds for dragonfly larvae, seeds and burrs caught on their coats are spread wide, and their rooting on the forest floor shapes the diversity of woodland plant communities.

Knowing that boars lived in the forest I walked through also charged the English countryside with a new and unusual possibility: danger. Boars, particularly farrowing sows protecting their young, can be aggressive, and will charge and attack intruders. Since the boars' return to the Forest of Dean, there've been reports of walkers being chased, dogs gored, horses newly nervous upon familiar paths. As I walked, I found myself paying a different quality of attention to my surroundings than I ever had before, listening apprehensively for the faintest sounds and scanning for signs of movement in the undergrowth. It made the forest a wilder place but in a sense a far more normal one, for conflict between humans and dangerous wildlife is commonplace in much of the world, from elephants trampling crops in India and Africa to alligators in Florida dining on pet dogs. In Britain, wolves, bears, lynxes and boars were long ago hunted to extinction, and we have forgotten what this is like.

The boar I met up against the fence wasn't a threat. It was a captive boar, one of a few kept by a local gamekeeper and safely behind wire, but it provoked intense introspection about my place in the world. This creature was one of the semi-legendary beasts charging straight out of the medieval literature I'd read at university, the quarry hunted in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, creatures renowned for their formidable ferocity and power. In medieval romances, boars were seen as a challenge to masculinity and hunting them a test of endurance and bravery. When we meet animals for the first time, we

expect them to conform to the stories we've heard about them. But there is always, always a gap. The boar was still a surprise. Animals are.

We have a long history of territorial anxiety over wild animals intruding on our spaces. The seventeenth-century English garden writer William Lawson advised his readers of the tools they'd need to keep their properties free of marauding beasts: a 'fayre and swift greyhound, a stone-bowe, gunne, and if neede require, an apple with a hooke for a Deere'. Concerns about the danger of Gloucestershire boars have led to efforts by the Forestry Commission to reduce their population in the Forest of Dean: three hundred and sixty-one were shot in 2014 and 2015, despite anti-hunting activists attempting to get in the way of hunters to prevent the cull. The controversy over how to manage English wild-boar populations points to the contradictory ways that we understand animals and their social uses. Wolves can be depredators of livestock or icons of pristine wilderness; spotted owls can be intrinsically important inhabitants of old-growth forests or nuisances that inhibit logging and livelihoods. These creatures become stand-ins for our own battles over social and economic resources.

When animals become so rare that their impact on humans is negligible, their ability to generate new meanings lessens, and it is then that they come to stand for another human notion: our moral failings in our relationship to the natural world. The world has lost half its wildlife in my own lifetime. Climate change, habitat loss, pollution, pesticides and persecution have meant that vertebrate species are dying out over a hundred times as fast as they would in a world without humans. The single boar appearing from behind the trees felt like a token of hope; it made me wonder if our damage to the natural world might not be irreversible, that creatures that are endangered or locally extinct might one day reappear.

So many things were affecting about this encounter: not just the calling-forth of an animal icon into flesh, but the realisation that there is a particular form of intelligence in the world that is boar-intelligence, boar-sentience. And being considered by a mind that is not human forces you to reconsider the limits of your own. As the boar looked up at me, it was obvious that my knowledge of boars was limited, and only now, face to snout with a real one, its eyes fixed on mine, did I wonder what a boar really was and, oddly, what it thought of me. I had fitted the boar into my medievalist memories, but my friend, who was once a boxer, admired its physique. Talked of its cutlass-curved, razor-sharp tusks. Its small legs and hindquarters that work to steer the huge muscular bulk of the front end. Its manifest, frightening power.

As he spoke, the boar pressed itself up against the fence and sniffed loudly through its wet nostrils. Rashly, I moved my hand towards it. It looked up, flat-faced, with red boar eyes considering, and sniffed again. I drew my hand away. Then, after a while, I lowered it again. The boar stood. It allowed me to push my fingers gently into its arched black back. It felt like a hairbrush with too many bristles and backed with thick muscle, not wood. There was wool underneath the hair. 'He'll be getting his winter coat soon,' said the boy. 'Six-inch guard hairs.' I scratched the beast's broad hump and felt, as the seconds passed, that some tiny skein of aggression in his heart was starting to thrum. I have learned not to distrust intuitions like this. Suddenly we both decided that this was enough, my heart skipping, he grunting and feinting.

Wandering off, he sank on to his knees, nose to the ground, then, with infinite luxury, sat and rolled on to his side. Ripples ran down his hide. I was entranced. For all my interest in this creature, the boar had become bored with me and simply walked away.

Inspector Calls

I've a territorial, defensive soul. There's nothing like a visit from the landlord to put me on the back foot and then some. After most of the night cleaning the house I was spilling with contagious rage. I'd even considered burning the bastard building to the ground. It seemed a logical means of preventing any complaints about coffee rings on the Ercol dining table.

By eleven, things are calmer. I'm upstairs marking essays at my desk. The air is soothing, the window open upon cool grey. A red Ford draws up outside and a man and woman get out. The prospective tenants have an eight-year-old son, and he is autistic, my landlord told me. There's no sign of him. But these are parents; they're moving with the almost imperceptible restraint of manner born of care so he must be in the back of the car. Yes. And as he climbs out my heart folds and falls, not because he is wearing a stripy red and orange jumper but because he is grasping in each hand a model sea lion.

Downstairs the grown-ups are talking, and the boy is bouncing about in the semi-darkness of the hall. He is totally bored. I look down at his hands. Each of the sea lions has chips of missing paint about its nose where it has interacted with the other, or with something hard, and I ask him if he wants to see my parrot. His eyebrows rise and he waits. A brief, wordless OK from his parents, and

we ascend the stairs. He counts each step out loud. And we stop in front of the cage. The bird and the boy stare at each other.

They love each other. The bird loves the boy because he is entirely full of joyous, manifest amazement. The boy just loves the bird. And the bird does that chops-fluffed-little-flirting twitch of the head, and the boy does it back. And soon the bird and the boy are both swaying sideways, backwards and forwards, dancing at each other, although the boy has to shift his grip on the plastic sea lions to cover both ears with his palms, because the bird is so delighted he's screeching at the top of his lungs.

'It is *loud*!' says the boy.

'That's because he is happy,' I say. 'He likes dancing with you.'

And then, after a few moments, I tell him that I like his sea lions very much.

He frowns as if he's assuming upon himself the responsibility of my being one of the elect.

'Lots of people think they are …' he pauses contemptuously, '*seals*.'

'But of course they are sea lions!' I say.

'Yes,' he says.

We glory in the importance of accurate classification.

His parents come into the room. They have decided the house is too small for them and their son. So much for my week of cleaning purgatory.

His mother looks anxious. 'Come on, Antek! We are going now.'

There is, suddenly, one of the most beautiful moments of human–animal interaction I have ever seen. Antek nods his head gravely at the parrot, and the parrot makes a deep, courteous bow in return.

A minute later I hear the front door open, and just before they cross the threshold, I can hear clicking that I suspect