



a space underneath where sheepdogs and orphan lambs would once have curled up, gently warming the slumbering shepherd above. The hut has a barrelled tin roof and wooden ceiling, so when it rains the whole vessel resounds to the tattoo. Sleep through that, and you could still be woken early by magpies clattering along the corrugated rooftop like Cajun washboard-players, or an ill-bred bluetit noisily investigating the eaves. Across the field is the cabin I built for *my* son. I like to think it will always be like this: future cities of unofficial shanties stretching away across the country, down the generations.

*28 May*

Lying in bed in the shepherd's hut is an out-of-body experience in which you are suspended six feet above the bottom of a wooden boat, gazing into its wooden hull and along the line of its keel. Everything is upside down, of course, but it is such another world in there that anything is possible. You gaze out of the open door at a wake of bubbling cow-parsley and the green depths of a hedge in May. Lift your face up to a porthole and you can survey the green waters of Cowpasture Meadow coming up to meet you as you voyage across doldrums of Sargasso buttercups in lazy pools, or navigate towards the beacon of a solitary green-winged orchid.

*13 June*

I slept in the shepherd's hut last night after an evening swim in the moat, now beginning to weed up, under an almost-full moon. It was so bright, you could hardly call it proper darkness at all. At ten to four I was awoken by a blackcap hopping along the tin roof, then striking up the most exquisite warbling, at first utterly solo in the half-light, soon joined by other birds. It sang its heart out, moving about the roof now and then between phrases or cadenzas

to a new vantage point, eventually ascending into the ash tree that overhangs the hut and the pond beside it. You hear everything in the hut: the foxes barking down the lane, even the rabbits thumping their hind legs on the ground sometimes. Easing myself up on one elbow about twenty past four, I inched back the curtain and surveyed the meadow. Yellow pools of buttercup, and here and there a pyramidal orchid, or a lush, intensely purple patch of the southern marsh orchid, the huge flowers stacked and layered like wedding cakes. A crow was flying in big circles above the pasture, climbing steeply, then gliding down for pure pleasure.

I dozed back to sleep, but was awoken by a most violent rumbling and shaking of the whole hut, then a sound of loud scratching. For a moment I thought a cat must have leapt in, somehow, through an open window and on to my bed. Then, looking out of the window in some alarm, I realized what it was: a roe-deer rubbing herself against one corner of the hut, inches away from my pillow. A clamour of hooves as she and two others bounced off through the standing hay. The birdsong was by now too loud for sleep, so I adjourned to the house across the dew for breakfast.

### *10 August*

I'm lying in the shepherd's hut on a wooden bed under a boarded roof like a pine tent, between walls panelled with pine, tongued and grooved horizontally. Each time a nail has pierced the deep amber wood it has bled a black rusty stain that has crept along the grain and blurred, as though the wood or the wagon itself were travelling at speed. A woodpecker shrieks across the field. A wasp worries the windowpane, then zigzags above the bed and eventually blunders into the outer air. The open door frames a wall of green: the hawthorn, maple, blackthorn hedge, the dipping wands of an ash, nettles, graceful flowers of grasses. All stir in the hot breeze. Dust motes flicker and drift in the window-light. In the far corner, the stainless-steel stove-pipe rises like a new stem from the rusty

little stove. On the other side of the doorway is the pine corner-cupboard I bodged out of skip-wood containing spare blankets and Bushmills for cold nights. Across the common, cows have been lowing all night. Perhaps the weather will change. I sleep confined in pine.

Why do I sleep outdoors? Because of the sound of the random dripping of rain off the maples or ash trees over the roof of the railway wagon, or the hopping of a bird on the wet felt of the roof, or the percussion of a twig against the steel stove-chimney. Out there, I hear the yawn of the wind in the trees along Cowpasture Lane. I feel in touch with the elements in a way I never do indoors.

Sleeping one time in Burgate Wood on the moated island of the old hall, I put my cheek against the loam and the cool ground ivy. When I closed my eyes I saw the iceberg depths of the wood's root-world. Walking there, picking my way through the trees, I had thought of it as perpendicular until I lay down and entered the ground-world. This is the part of a wood that only reveals itself occasionally after a big storm, when the trees have keeled over and the roots are thrown suddenly upright, clutching earth and stones. How deep do roots go?

I also have a railway wagon, which I hauled into one of my fields years ago. Working or sleeping in my railway wagon is like embarking on a journey. An ash tree growing just behind it strokes the roof and plays tunes on the stove-pipe chimney with its branches whenever the wind blows. Wind rattles the heavy wooden sliding door and seeps in through small gaps between the boards. The entire structure is of wood: an oak frame strengthened by bolted iron straps and brackets, and by double walls of sturdy pine boards, all secured by screws, running horizontally inside and vertically outside to shed rain better. The roof is barrel-vaulted with oak, boarded above, with thick tarred roofing felt on top. When I bought the wagon it had no floor, so I made a wooden one, insulated beneath and damp-proofed by building paper.

There's so much room inside, you could happily live in the wagon. It is fifteen feet by eight, with an airy ceiling nine feet high. At each end, a tiny foot-square window in a corner opens by sliding up a wooden shutter and propping it with a stick. The wagon is sunk so deep in the massive hedge that the light seeping in is pure green. The interior is painted cream, and the sliding front door faces south. This will open to a width of six feet, so plenty of light comes in, reflected off the blond, drying hay of the meadow. Opposite the entrance is a cast-iron Tortoise stove with a stainless-steel chimney pipe that runs up inside the wagon and heats it in winter. When the stove is going full tilt, the hot metal sometimes glows red in the dark, and it is burnished rainbow blues and reds from the passage and oxidation of the hot gases. Outside on the roof, the chimney is topped with a jaunty steel Chinaman's hat to keep the rain off. Most of one end of the wagon is occupied by a wooden bed whose ends I rescued in a damaged state from the auction sheds at Diss and repaired. When I light the candles in the three Moroccan lanterns, I think of something the artist Roger Ackling said to me, quoting Thoreau: 'Electricity kills darkness, candlelight illuminates it.'

In the warm embrace of the wagon's wood, I always sleep like a cat for eight hours at a time. It is almost as if I were actually being rocked and lulled by the rhythm of its wheels on a nocturnal *Night Mail* journey. What is it about being enclosed by wood that is so comforting? Is this some kind of Reichian orgone box? Or is it simply a matter of feng shui: that the bed is oriented in the right way for deep sleep? I think it more likely that it is the symbolic act of leaving worldly things behind in the house, walking a hundred-yard winding path through a hay meadow and climbing aboard the uncluttered wagon, sunk deep into the leaf-purified air of an unruly Suffolk hedgerow that calms me down and encourages the dreams. It is a version of the wild, and always a return: every cabin is a version of all other cabins, dens, treehouses and nests. I leave the door open, with just a swaying curtain to keep the moths away from the lanterns.

19 August

Sleeping in the railway wagon. ‘Have you got your ticket?’ said A, as I went off over the field. There is plenty of wind, bashing the ash branches against the stove-pipe chimney, playing a tune on it. Wind creates a soothing sound I’m quite accustomed to, like the creaking of ship’s timbers, so it actually sends me to sleep. Going out into the dark meadow at night, it would be easy to mistake the outlines of the young walnut trees for deer.

29 August

In the railway wagon I hang a pale cotton curtain at the open door, and the sun filters through it. In the mornings I lie in bed watching the shadow puppet show of insects. Last night owls sounded their cool oboe-notes along the hedges. Theirs is such a soothing note for such murderous birds. Owls and the moon work hand in hand; accomplices in the killing of voles and shrews. I lay listening to the nightly shrewicides in the meadow and along the lane.

Sleeping north–south does seem to improve the quality of my slumbers. ‘They had been denied the hospitality of sound sleep,’ says Saint-Exupéry in *Terre des Hommes*. The beds in the house are all east–west, but the beds in the railway wagon and the shepherd’s hut are both north–south. But to sleep half a field away from the house, tucked into a hedge, with an open door facing south into the meadow and plenty of cool night air, must surely add very much to the chances of sleep. The closing of the door on all the daytime stuff in the house, and so little in the shed to encumber the thoughts: just a few rugs, a stove, a bed, a table and chair.

There’s more truth about a camp than a house. Planning laws need not worry the improvising builder because temporary structures are more beautiful anyway, and you don’t need permission for them. There’s more truth about a camp because that is the

position we are in. The house represents what we ourselves would like to be on earth: permanent, rooted, here for eternity. But a camp represents the true reality of things: we're just passing through.

cart it and stack the woodshed to the roof with willow and ash, and again as you barrow it to the hearth. Then, at last, the final warming in front of the fire, the climax and finale of the whole exercise, the sum of so much work, so many hours lost in thought.

Building the new desk under the window in the study, looking south across the garden to the moat. Perfectionism kicks in and all the same self-critical criteria that go into a piece of writing. I make a yew bracket to peg to the oak wall post and support the top, a slab of fine-grained Oregon pine, and a careful wooden sub-frame or chassis. I fill some open cracks in the grain with plaster, smooth it down and carefully stain it pale blue using a delicate watercolour brush. I hollow out one of the old bolt-holes in the top to accommodate a smooth, round flattened pebble from the Hebrides, like a tiny curling stone. It is a sort of worry-bead.

At one end of my desk sits the laminated hub of an early wooden aeroplane propeller. It is a massive thing, with the two linen-skinned blades amputated at their stems. It has been constructed beautifully from ten planks of walnut a foot wide and three-quarters of an inch thick, originally glued and clamped together. I came across it years ago at a Norfolk country auction and was immediately reminded of the Venus de Milo by the deliberate incompleteness of its form, by the way the sawn-off, imaginary arms turned it into something sculptural. I wasn't the only one thus smitten by its mystery that day, and remember holding on tight as the price went into a steep climb. Four lines of coded capitals were carved into the wood where it swept into the convex cleavage between the two blades. I made a brass-rubbing of them on a sheet of typing paper with a 4B pencil and read:

LUCIFER  
 DRG P3I53  
 DIA 7-9  
 PIT 5-5

Decoded, this means that the propeller was designed for one of Bristol Aircraft's Lucifer aero engines, and therefore made around 1925 or soon after. DRG stands for the drawing number of the original propeller design and DIA is the diameter of the propeller: seven feet nine inches. PIT is its pitch, the number of degrees through which the blades have been twisted out of direct alignment.

I use the muscular propeller-hub on my desk as a bookend. It contains stories I shall never know. It belongs to the era of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, when every flight was an adventure, and, in its long sleep, it probably relives the spinning elation of an aerial life, like a cat dreaming of chasing its tail.

I sit at my desk on the elm seat of a Windsor smoker's bow chair. It is nineteen and a half inches square, cut from a single inch-and-a-quarter plank, elegantly rounded at the corners and tough enough to anchor the beech legs as well as eight hand-turned chair backs that support the bowed arm and backrest. It is probably not far off a hundred years old, and the seat, originally adzed and spokeshaved into shape, has been subtly worn, polished and rendered even more comfortable by generations of shifting bottoms. Its design is entirely traditional, yet the infinite variations of every handmade component give each chair its individuality and a kind of intimate informality that could never be achieved by the techniques of modern mass production. Its beech components were most likely turned by bodgers working out of doors on foot-treadle pole-lathes in the steep hangars of the Chilterns above High Wycombe. As with the elm hub of a cart wheel, or the elm keel of a wooden ship, it is the elm seat that holds together the chair. Elm always seems to be the axis of things. When bells ring out from the church tower, they swing on massive timber stocks of elm.

I belong to the generation that grew up with elm. The big tree at the bottom of our back garden was an elm, and I once knew every crevice in its latticed bark. I even tried to cut it down as a small boy, aiming a hatchet at a minuscule notch over what seemed like several years, barely making an impression, while my parents benignly turned the other way. The tree was one of a long crescent

of elm and oak almost certainly planted in the eighteenth century around the perimeter of the old Pinner Park, spaced close enough to keep the squirrels airborne. I rode my bike to school past Long Elms, another eighteenth-century elm avenue planted on the old Chantry Estate, leading to Hatch End.

My prep school was in Hatch End, a suburb of Pinner, and it was there that I acquired my first slow-worms from a boy called George Porges. Porges had arrived a term late in our class, so had ground to make up socially. He set about creating a myth of himself on Day One by showing us the bullet scar on his back, acquired, as he explained, when he was shot by border guards as he fled his mother country, Czechoslovakia. He spoke faultless English without a trace of an accent, and I am pretty sure in retrospect that the scar was a birthmark.

Porges lived a few miles away on the Piccadilly Line at Rayners Lane, where there was a confluence of tube lines with a triangular island of long grass and brambles between them. In our young minds, it came to resemble Czechoslovakia, surrounded on all sides by an Iron Curtain of live electric rails. Porges claimed this was the source of his slow-worms. He alone was able to capture them by dint of death-defying expeditions across the live rails. Porges knew all about the marketing concept of Added Value. So desirable were these reptiles that Porges was willing to pay the ultimate price for them. The Rayners Lane island grew in our imaginations into a Galapagos, cut off from the rest of suburbia by the Scylla and Charybdis of live rails and the Railway Police, who would impose unspeakable penalties if you hadn't already been fried.

Thus snatched from under the nose of Death by the heroic Porges, the slow-worms themselves seemed to carry electricity in their metallic bodies, arcing when they touched, sending shivers of envy through the entire class. They had all the macabre glamour of black mambas with none of the risk. Everyone now jostled after break-time to sit next to Porges, and most of us wanted his slow-worms too. He commanded outrageous prices. Now and again we would go into secret conclave and work out ways to cross

the railway lines ourselves wearing several pairs of wellington boots, waders and rubber gloves, but it was pure bravado.

Porges had us mesmerized, and we were all beginning to suffer loss of concentration in our craving. On top of this, I had a few problems at home. It was my white mice. They were doubling their numbers almost daily, and there was a queue for the treadmill. I mentioned very casually to Porges that I might have a mouse or two available for sale. To my amazement, he took the bait, offering me his reptiles but naming his price in rodents in double figures. This suited me perfectly, but prep school had already taught me enough by the age of seven not to hand over the mice without a pained expression.

Our classroom might as well have been an East End pub for all the wheeling and dealing that went on. Another boy, Smith, offered to the highest bidder a stone axe-head he claimed was Mohawk Indian and deadly, its edge having been impregnated with rattlesnake poison. Even to touch it could mean a slow, painful death. Again, my secret liquidity in mice paid off, and the axe-head was mine. This stone axe-head was the very first tool I owned and, as it happens, pretty much the first owned by *Homo sapiens*. As a relic from my own Stone Age, it has always been more of a talisman than anything of much practical use, except as reserve schoolboy currency. I still have it on my desk, and it hasn't killed me yet.

The ants outside my study swarmed this afternoon at 3 p.m. exactly, all the young queens climbing up blades of grass and taking off, escorted by excited workers scattering in every direction. A warm, humid afternoon.

The virgin queen ants fly off south-west, the workers racing about as air-traffic control, chivvying the nervous princesses into unsteady flight. They send them up a small cow-parsley plant to get some extra lift and take off from the dizzy top.

I'm looking at one of the black-and-white photographs that feature in the gallery on my study wall. My younger self is there in plimsolls, khaki shorts and elastic snake-buckle belt, standing on

Campsite Track beside a donkey. I'm holding up my butterfly net like a semaphore flag, and a knapsack, probably full of collecting jars, is slung over one shoulder. Campsite Track led across the heath to our tents, sheltered and concealed within a series of hollows in a range of gorse-topped, gravel dunes above a railway cutting on the Bournemouth line.

This is where I first came to know the New Forest, returning several times to camp at Beaulieu Road during the school holidays with the Botany and Zoology sixth form and our Biology teacher Barry Goater, who was in his first teaching job, in charge of the school Biology Department. A formidable lepidopterist, ornithologist and all-round naturalist, Barry infected us all with his wild enthusiasm.

Although he would modestly deny it, Barry Goater was the instigator of an extraordinary educational experiment. In a quiet corner of the New Forest, he established a camp for the detailed study and mapping of the natural history of a stretch of the wild forest woodland, bog and heath surrounding Beaulieu Road by his Biology sixth form. The camp became something of an institution at our school in the relatively treeless Cricklewood. It was traditional for each generation of us sixth form naturalists to return there again and again and taste the intoxicating pleasure of exploration and discovery in the wild for ourselves. Each of us had a particular project, literally a field of inquiry, and the work we were doing was genuinely original. We learnt the scientific disciplines of botany, zoology and ecology, and we kept our eyes open as all-round naturalists. What we discovered was particular to the place, and, best of all, it belonged to us.

Beaulieu Road was our America, we were pioneers, and the map we jointly drew and refined through gradual accretions of personal observation represented not only the complex natural ecology of the place but also an ambitious and entirely novel cooperation between several generations of the sixth form botanists and zoologists of our school. Through our cumulative endeavours we were charting the relationships between the plants and animals of the

place. But the records we kept were also a testament to our own human relationships as naturalists, botanists and zoologists. We were learning at first-hand how exploration and scholarship can evolve and progress in time through cooperation and the free exchange of ideas. Small wonder that the experience influenced so many of our lives so profoundly. Over the course of a total of twenty-four camps from April 1955 to the spring of 1961, everything any of us discovered or recorded was logged in two extraordinary volumes known as the Beaulieu Tomes.

Just as in *Swallows and Amazons*, Richard Jefferies's *Bevis*, Shackleton's accounts of the Antarctic or any explorer's journal, we enthusiastically set about naming all the topographical features of our wild haunts at Beaulieu Road on a handmade map. Of the almost 100,000 acres that now constitute the New Forest, our chosen territory of water, bog, dry heath and woodland was a rough oblong three miles by two straddling north and south of the road from Lyndhurst to Beaulieu. We had naturally adopted, or adapted, the old names where they existed, and made up our own where they didn't. We drew our water in green canvas buckets from a pure spring under the railway embankment known simply as the Spring, or Campsite Spring. Beyond it, in a gentle valley across Black Down, lay the source of the Beaulieu River at a confluence of its wooded headwaters, the Matley Stream, Deerleap Stream and Matley Stream Tributary. Interesting ferns, liverworts and mosses grew under the Matley Stream Bridge where the waters passed under the railway, and verdant *lawns* lay along the banks of the infant river. 'Lawns' is the New Forest term for the strips of grazing you come across in woodland clearings and along the banks of streams, close-cropped by deer, rabbits and ponies.

Over by Station Heath lay the boggy Gentian Valley with its marsh gentians, and First Bog, snowed with the fluffy tops of cotton grass. Beyond it was the huge expanse of Second Bog, perfumed by bog myrtle bushes at night and bounded by an ancient bank, the Bishop of Winchester's Dyke, known to us as the Bishop of Winchester's Bottom. South of the dyke lay Woodfidley, full of old

oaks, holly, beeches and fritillaries on its sunny rides: an outback like the wildwood of *Wind in the Willows*, to be respected in the dark. To the west of it were the shady depths of Denny Wood. On the other side of the railway, through Botrychium Bridge (named after the moonwort that grew on the bank near by) and Second Bog Outflow, was the mysterious Great Bog, where the snipe lay so close they could go off like landmines from under your boot. The bridge, christened after the ferns that grew on it, would have been Moonwort Bridge had it not been for our mentor's general preference for Linnaean accuracy over poetry. Ceterach Bridge, a couple of miles to the north in Matley Wood, was named after another fern, the rustyback, discovered and recorded in the Tomes in August 1958 by a schoolboy naturalist called George Peterken. Peterken's contribution is entitled 'Distribution of Ferns on the Railway Bridges' and records the 735 ferns of seven different species he found growing on or around the eleven bridges at Beaulieu Road that summer.

We also evolved our own vernacular for some of the Beaulieu plants and animals. The cream-striped caterpillars of the broom moth that lived on the bushes by our tents were always known as 'Bournemouth Belle caterpillars' after the brown and cream-liveried carriages of the famous train that used to steam through the cutting beside our camp each day.

Gradually over the years, from camp to camp, several generations of sixth formers wrote a detailed account of the Natural History of Beaulieu Road, including a flora listing 353 species of flowering plants, over 100 mosses, 21 liverworts and George Peterken's 735 ferns. We would arrive by train from Waterloo laden with camping kit, field guides, nets and collecting jars at a station that was little more than a halt in the wild centre of the forest. Campers would generally number anything between ten and twenty, and each of us worked in a particular field of study, setting off each morning to explore the territory, often lugging about with us our hefty copies of Clapham, Tutin and Warburg's *Flora of the British Isles*. Learned papers were written and presented over the campfire or in the bar

of the Beaulieu Road Hotel, finds passed round for inspection and the day's discoveries written up for the Tomes. Some were important enough for wider publication. A rare type of cuckoo flower was found by B. Fitzgerald growing in Shatterford Bottom, close to the railway line. It had no sexual organs, no stamens and no carpels, only petals, so could multiply by vegetative reproduction alone. The schoolboy botanist's drawing of the plant and its sterile flower was eventually published in the journals of the Hampshire Naturalists, and of the Botanical Society of the British Isles.

We soon picked up the standard techniques of ecological surveying, casting foot-square frames about on the heath or woodland floor at random and noting the variety and numbers of species within them. During the mapping of First Bog in September 1960, we waded or squelched about for days on end counting plants, flinging round our transect frames like abstract land artists. Barry Goater was unfailing in his insistence that close observation, often involving hours of patient counting and recording, was the foundation of all good science and truly original discovery. He himself was insatiably curious about everything, climbing trees to inspect birds' nests, getting up at daybreak to check the tilley-lamp moth trap or leading night patrols across the heather armed with torches and nets to sweep it for moths and caterpillars. Much of the work was physically demanding, and Barry, who ran for Shaftesbury Harriers and had been the RAF half-mile champion during his national service, seemed to have endless energy.

Some of our projects, as logged in the Tomes, read almost like Swift's accounts of the scientists' experiments on Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels*: 'He had been eight years upon a project for extracting sun-beams out of cucumbers, which were to be put into vials hermetically sealed, and let out to warm the air in raw inclement summers.' We peered down a microscope and identified the seven species of mite parasitic in a blackbird's nest, conducted a census of the local leeches and patiently analysed the plant communities of pony-dung. One famous Beaulieu research project sparked itself off when somebody idly broke open several seedpods of the needle

whin, *Genista anglica*, growing on Dyke Heath, and discovered the seeds being devoured by a weevil hidden inside. A specimen was hurried off to R. T. Thompson, the weevil specialist at the Natural History Museum, where it was identified as *Apion genistae*. The mystery was that the infested pods all looked perfectly developed from the outside and showed no sign of perforation. How the weevils had got inside was a mystery. A big needle whin pod-counting operation began, and, out of the 1,668 pods we boy detectives doggedly opened, well over half had been attacked by the weevil. About a fifth of the infested seedpods also contained the larvae of a small chalcid wasp, *Spintherus leguminium*, parasitic on the hapless weevils. The seed was devoured by the weevil, and the weevil by the wasp: the pods were like Russian dolls.

Another of our Laputian experiments centred on the pony corrals across the road from the little outback station and the remote Beaulieu Road Hotel, where we used to buy our supplies of gourmet food: beans, bread, bacon, eggs, tomatoes and Mars bars. Three times a year, in late summer and autumn, the tough little wild ponies and their foals were rounded up from all over the New Forest by the commoners and driven into the corrals at Beaulieu to be auctioned. The pony sales take place in August, September and October. For the rest of the year, the wooden-railed corrals and the auctioneer's podium at the centre stand deserted.

In April one year Stephen Waters, the camp's resident expert on mosses and liverworts, discovered large quantities of mousetail, *Myosurus minimus*, the smallest member of the buttercup family, growing in the corrals. It is a scarce plant and an exciting find anywhere, but for some reason it was thriving here and nowhere else in the forest, not even immediately beyond the pens. By September the same year there was not a trace of it, yet in the spring of the following year it was back again in the same profusion.

We got down on our hands and knees in every one of the fifty-six corrals and recorded the numbers of each plant species we found by repeating the process over the course of the year, and gradually we boy detectives uncovered the life story of *Myosurus minimus*.

The secret, we found, lay in the heavy trampling and manuring of the ground during the pony sales. Mousetail is an annual, setting the seed in early summer. It was later trodden in by the ponies at the sales, and germinated the following spring. The trampling of the ground destroyed the other competing plants without burying the *Myosurus* seeds too deeply, and the plant seemed to thrive in the copious manure, as did we as we warmed to our quest. The wetter and more flooded the corrals, the better the mousetail liked it. Where it occurred, it was in almost pure patches on otherwise bare ground. Here was a plant that had discovered its perfect niche. Here too was a wonderfully accidental lesson in the ways of ecology: a perfect wedding between the tiniest of the buttercup family, an ancient custom of the New Forest commoners and the wild ponies.

Tucked away in the botanical Tomes is another account of a survey of the algae of Beaulieu by my friend Ian Baker and me in which we took samples in phials from 47 different watery locations and laboured over microscopes to identify 17 different genera of algae. We would both have been sixteen at the time. In that same August week, under 'Other interesting records', is one of the many footnotes about our day-to-day encounters: 'A young nightjar was found by R. Deakin among the heather in a stony place opposite the campsite on the east side of the railway. About half grown, it was extremely well camouflaged.' The well-oiled, liquid churring of these oddly moth-like birds was a continuous background to our summer evenings and nights in the camp, like taxis waiting with engines ticking over. They were never far away and sometimes flitted before us on the paths through the heather at dusk. We lay in our tents on beds of heather and bracken, listening to curlews at dusk and tawny owls calling across Woodfidley all night. Sometimes we even ventured into it at dusk to watch the bats. We awoke to the song of woodlarks. In December of that year a psychopathic great grey shrike arrived and terrorized all the other birds, and a flock of forty pied wagtails 'whitened the road' near the station. The Tomes note that the shrike, our English butcher bird, had 'white underpants'.

Magnificent raft spiders, *Dolomedes fimbriatus*, lived in 'great numbers' in Second Bog, and we observed how they would submerge, when alarmed by us, clasping little air-bubble diving bells like bright pearls for as much as twenty minutes at a time. We timed their dives with nerdish precision. The sight of a schoolboy, intent on the second hand of his H. Samuel 'Everite' watch, was an obvious challenge. Under a bridge there, ten-spined sticklebacks hovered in the golden peaty water. We kept a pair in an aquarium in our laboratory and saw with what loving care they built their nest of twigs. Out with Barry Goater watching tiny flies struggling in the clutches of the science-fiction sundew plants on Dyke Heath, we also clocked two new birds to add to the ninety species already listed in the log: a pair of hobbies, the male perched on a stump, and a spotted flycatcher.

On the morning of 14 September 1956, a boy called John Rose, out wandering in Gentian Valley, saw the first adder at Beaulieu Road. We often saw grass snakes, particularly in the alder woods along the Matley Stream or on the railway embankment when we went to fetch water from the spring, but the Tomes only list adders as 'occasional'. Common lizards scuttled about everywhere in the dunes of gravel-diggings by the camp and on the heaths. Slow-worms, on the other hand, are recorded as 'rarely seen'.

The relatively low snake count, at least in the adder department, came as something of a surprise after all the stories of 'Brusher' Mills, the legendary New Forest snake-catcher of the late nineteenth century, who lived in the woods in a charcoal-burner's turf-roofed lean-to of sticks and drank in the old Railway Inn at Brockenhurst. There were photographs of him in there in his pudding-bowl hat, bearded, with a forked stick, the tool of his trade, dangling a snake by its tail, standing proudly before the entrance of his bothy. He was an object of some fascination to us. We noticed he wore tall boots, at least two leather waistcoats under his jacket and sturdy corduroys, possibly several pairs. He was said to have caught many thousands of live snakes in his lifetime and put most of them on the London train to the Zoo, where they were fed to the birds

## *Roots*

of prey. There were also local rumours of a roaring trade in homoeopathic unguents, somehow based on essence of adder. There were times when we wondered if old Brusher might, perhaps, have caught *all* the snakes in the New Forest.

Two days into my first camp, on 26 April 1959, we heard the first cuckoo and entered it in the Tomes. Under the strong influence of Robert Frost, I was moved to write a beginner's poem about it, later published in the school magazine, a lament for the ousted fledglings, 'Who'll never fidget, squeak or yawn/ Beneath the breast that is your pawn'. I remember feeling whining poetry was somehow subversive of the objective, scientific approach Goater encouraged us to adopt. Yet he himself was always so full of enthusiasm and passion for nature he could never hide his own strong emotional attachment to Beaulieu Road and its natural history. Later more of my Beaulieu scribbles appeared in the magazine, a Wordsworthian effort occasioned by my first encounter with a marsh gentian in the eponymous valley. Not one of us was immune to the poetry of the place. One boy, Greystoke, who had only ever stayed in luxury hotels before, took to camping with all the zeal of the new convert and never missed an opportunity to rediscover his inner backwoodsman at Beaulieu. It was only much later that I realized the whole point about Beaulieu was that in teaching me to make connections, it was revealing the intimate kinship of ecology and poetry.