

*An
Oakwoods
Almanac*

Other works by Gerry Loose include

Change (images by K. Sweeney McGee)
Yuga Night (with Larry Butler & Kathleen McGee)
Knockariddera
a measure
Eitgal
Being Time
The Elementary Particles
Tongues of Stone
Printed on Water — New & Selected Poems *
the deer path to my door
that person himself *
fault line

as editor

The Holistic Handbook
Seed Catalogue (with Morven Gregor)
Ten Seasons: explorations in botanics
(with photographs by Morven Gregor)

as editor & translator

The Botanical Basho (with Yushin Toda)

**Shearsman titles*

Gerry Loose

*An
Oakwoods
Almanac*

with photographs by
Morven Gregor

Shearsman Books

Published in the United Kingdom in 2015 by
Shearsman Books Ltd
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
BRISTOL
BS16 7DF

Shearsman Books Ltd Registered Office
30-31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
(this address not for correspondence)

www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-435-2

Copyright © Gerry Loose, 2015.
Images copyright © Morven Gregor, 2015.

The right of Gerry Loose to be identified as the author of this work
has been asserted by him in accordance with the
Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.
All rights reserved.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Parts of this book were first published in *A Wilder Vein* (ed Linda Cracknell,
Two Ravens Press 2009) under the title 'Ardnamurchan Almanac'; in
Earthlines, Sylva Caledonia catalogue and others in the online journal
Gists and Piths.

I am grateful for a Creative Scotland Award and a Kone Foundation
Residency at Saari Manor, which allowed me time to live in the woods
and to both start and finish this book.

My gratitude is also extended to those friends who read and commented on
this book as it was being written: Peter Manson, Tom Leonard,
Gerrie Fellows, Maggie Graham, Larry Butler; and above all,
my partner, Morven Gregor.

In memory of the hound, Dharma, who asked no questions.

CONTENTS

One

Sunart.....7

Two

Saari.....99

One

Sunart

2007

September 21st

I'm given an unexpected release of tears this morning. On the CD player, I'm playing Verdi's *Requiem*, with Ezio Piza and Beniamino Gigli, the great tenor of his day. The formality of the Latin verse, in the Italian pronunciation, suggestive as the words of a lover. Piza's profound bass rolls in the low and rocky Ardnamurchan hills. I listen to the *Dies Irae* and "the trumpet scattering wonderful sound" and I'm moved. The words and music reach into me to find something I didn't know was there, and the *Quid sum miser*: "Who am I, wretched man, to say, whom ask to intercede, when the just man is barely safe?" forces what's inside to my eyes.

Recorded in August 1939, with the full atrocities of another miserable war breaking.

I heard the day's news: Israeli planes in Syria, soldier killed in Helmand explosion, UK to retain certain types of cluster bombs, US private contractors open fire randomly in Iraq; fundamentalists killing each other and us. How do I reconcile this requiem – a plea to a god in whom I can't believe – with holy wars? I can take no more and turn off the actual music, pull on my boots and hat, walk out and up the hill.

Every day here at Gobsheallach, I visit the wood ant colonies. They are in a dip in the road, a single track. To the north, ascending the hill, are thin birches and wind-broken small oaks, all sitting among mosses and ferns and outcrops of rock emblazoned with lichen circles. To the south, where the burn gathers force, are alders, whose first spring growth had a fine papal and sexual purpling.

These little colonies – for they are little, unlike those classic ziggurats on the other side of the bay at the edge of the sitka plantation – have grown despite the maniac flailings of the hedging and verging machine, which, during the growing seasons, periodically demolishes their citadels. But their colonies survive. I don't know what will become of the other communities when the plantation over there is clear felled. I love these ants. They are Scottish wood ants, *Formica aquilonia* (though this colony of perhaps a hundred thousand may be *Formica lugubris*. There is plenty to mourn). *Seangan*, in Gaelic, the noun common to all ants: pismire; this one's a fairly large ant with a dark head and abdomen and red thorax. Scarce in most of Britain, though as its name might

imply, apparently plentiful here. Her work is never over. One mound is on the flat into soft earth, with bracken shading from the heat of the summer sun. Another is built on a rock outcrop. Here, at some point, a portion has slid off the slanting surface some three feet, to land, broken, on another pointed rock below. Upon this rock I will build. These ants move nest-building detritus, broken bracken and leaf fragments, from the lower wreckage of their city to the upper, to rebuild their labyrinths of underground chambers and grottoes. Maeterlinck, the Belgian playwright (later, Count Maurice Polydore Marie Bernard Maeterlinck), in his 1930 *The Life of the Ant*, writes of their architecture: "...in the ants' nest we should find the horizontal style predominant, with innumerable and apparently aimless meanderings, an endless extent of catacomb cities, from which none of us, were they built upon our scale, would ever emerge."

Maeterlinck's earlier book, *The Life of the White Ant* was a plagiarism of Eugene Marais' *The Soul of the White Ant*. Marais, a South African poet, scientist and morphine addict killed himself with a shotgun as a result.

All summer I've watched them at their task. Today is overcast, threatening rain; the temperature is dropping, but still there are ants walking backward up three feet of bare rock overhang. I track one: she's hefting a fragment of dried bracken four times her own length, as she ascends, never pausing, scaling a height thirteen hundred times her own: *her* height, since she is female and since I have seen others standing almost erect, caressing each other with their antennae, communicating what's unknowable to me. The three feet of the rock, though, isn't much when considering that most of their foraging is done in the birch and oak canopy many times this height. Here they milk sap-feeding bugs, like the aphid *Symydobius oblongus*, of their honey dew, which is drawn down by a gentle stroking; the honey dew, rich in sugars and vitamins, is the aphid's natural waste matter. This aphid is lovingly tended like any prize buttermilk-rich cow. The ants, as well as farming aphids, tend their pastures. They prey on herbivorous insects, sawflies and moths, which, unchecked, could soon deplete the tree pastures they feed on.

This climbing ant, in four minutes, as near as I can tell, has reached the upper city and disappeared into a newly made doorway, away from the prevailing rain. For now the rain has started. The queens here are moving into autumnal diapause, stopping their production of eggs, which have been laid unceasingly since their spring nuptial flight. The

flying males are allowed their moment of ecstasy, then die. Requiem; then hibernation. I stare out across the bay where the tide is ebbing away. Above, two hooded crows veer lazily away as they spot me. Something unseen, perhaps a heron, shrieks on Eilean Dubh, the black island, one of the two conjoined tidal islands in the Atlantic gate of the bay's mouth.

On the walk back to my cottage, the rain on my face, I gather enough chanterelles for my supper, together with some deer-nibbled birch bolete to dry for stock. There is a dead shrew, perfect on the metalled road, left to lost unstrung rosaries of sheep droppings.

Inter oves locum praesta, sings Gigli – Grant me a place among the sheep.

25th

*who decrees decay
allows for growth*

The little fly, *meanbh-chuileag*, *Culicoides impunctatus*, needs blood for its life cycle, which it draws unasked through its rolled mouthparts from mammals unfortunate enough to be in its vicinity. This, on lower, wetter ground in Ardnamurchan, is most of us who venture outside; with one hectare (about the size of a shinty field) reckoned to host to as many as 24 million larvae of that particular fly.

The adults draw energy more acceptably from flowers' nectar, but it's also a detritivore, feeding on rotting vegetation. Among its predators are the insectivorous plants – sundews and butter-worts, but even together with others – dragonflies, swifts, pipistrelles, palmated newts and the common lizard, these cannot keep pace with the sheer numbers of these midges with their bloodsucking habits.

Round about now, the midges begin to fade away, adults dying off in the colder, wetter and windier weather that's blowing in after the autumnal equinox. They are generally all gone by October. The final instar of the larva, however, overwinters in the ground, making sure of species continuance and mammal discomfort (mainly deer and humans) next year. The females, it seems, smell our breath and the presence of lactic acid. The first bite, and taste of blood, and she'll release pheromones to attract her sisters. Maybe the answer is to neither take milk nor to breathe. Nobody has ever recorded dead vegans being bitten.

The disappearance of the midge happens at the same time as the migration of the martins that flickered over and round the byres all summer. Here in Gobsheallach, the martins' nesting sites had been disturbed by recent building works and the prowling cats, but having flown for up to three months from sub-Saharan Africa to get here, they don't give up easily. With the hills changing from purple to brown, though, they're away south again, apparently landing long enough to rest and then make the dangerous journey maybe fifteen thousand miles north, a hundred and sixty odd miles a day, to arrive in time to help eat midges.

Bluetongue fits into my imagination somewhere between bluestocking and the nose of a permanently and amiably confused drinker. The bluetongue virus could affect the other controversial mammals in these parts, along with foot and mouth: sheep. Although the virus has so far been found in the UK only in a part of England, maybe five hundred miles from here, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) estimates that the midge which spreads this virus (the same genus as the *meanbh-chuileag*) can travel maybe a mile a day; "However, if caught in suitable meteorological conditions midges can be carried much farther distances, especially over water masses, i.e. more than 200 kms (124 miles)". Bluetongue virus was first described in South Africa, coincidentally where "our" housemartins have been recorded landing.

Sheep here are practically as wild as the deer they share the hill with. Although, safely grazing on sea grasses and on the tidal islets in the bay, the small black Hebridean sheep and their sometimes piebald lambs are approachable enough. As is Charley, the one-eyed tup, who wants only to overwinter in my kitchen; drink my malt for all I know. Difficult to control, then. I've seen crofters, aunties, uncles and postmen pressed into service, with dogs sometimes hindering the gathering for shearing or dipping, all running and shouting across the sands, over the thrift and campion, re-enacting somehow a Keystone comedy. The midges, though, have no such trouble with sheep or deer.

Another sort of clearing of the land, again with financial subtexts, may soon afflict people here. The advent (coming with the wind) of the bluetongue midge, neither amiable nor at all literary may take up where unscrupulous landlords left off.

The Sunart show, just after the first foot-and-mouth movement restriction orders this summer, was a sad affair: no sheep or cattle. A

wet west Highland day, with only a hectoring Loch Lomondside farmer displaying his sheepdogs' skill in herding (flocking?) ducks from one part of the central ring to another, not once but twice.

Ardnamurchan, described in one unsuccessful attempt to attract tourists as "almost an island", jutting as it does with its odd rhino head into the Atlantic between Mull and the small isles of Rum, Eigg, Muck and Canna, its eye a ring-dyke of volcanic origin, is most definitely not an island – as if water were in any case a safeguard from viruses.

The commonwealth of martins and the interlocking communities of deer, humans and midges ebb and flow. With the midges and the martins, the motor-homes move at their stately pace along the single track roads, southing, overwintering, perhaps, with bluetongue midges. Their place in local economy is debated; with a former B&B crofter (her croft sits among one of the best examples of Sunart oakwoods) speaking of their coming into the area coinciding with the decline of her business. As they depart, the other caravan dwellers return – the travellers are back in Glen Tarbert – a glen of winter deer. The travellers were here long before the holidaying motor home-owners; before the feudal-minded industrialists who bought sporting estates in the late nineteenth century. Alastair Cameron, in his "Annals and Recollections of Sunart" records their spring arrival (together with the long disappeared "milestone inspectors") in the first decade of the twentieth century: "it was nothing unusual for me on my way home from school to meet three or four squads of them with their carts and horses. Stewarts, Macmillans, Johnstones, Williamsons, and up till 1908 or thereabouts, Browns and Wilsons were the most regular." They were kindly received, with their tales and tinware.

People cleared for sheep; sheep cleared for deer; conceivably deer and sheep both giving way to a virus; travellers yielding to tourists. Depopulation continues.

26th

It's just after the equinox. Tonight it's full moon – the harvest moon. This moon rises due east and sets due west. The length of a day is equal to the length of a night, but night, a cockstep at a time, is catching me unawares each twilight. There's a threshold here. From here I can stare into winter. It makes me edgy seeing the blackness in this morning's brilliant sun, reflected in the little pools of last night's rain left among rushes. Today's

tides will be high and already the bay is preparing itself, with a calmness in the dazzle of sun, for the tons of water which will later pour in to cover its cold sands. The clouds are piled high to the south. Bare rock outcrops on the slopes glimmer, blink back in an unaccustomed brightness. Peat hags hold their water like the toothless crones they are, only tufts of bog cotton above on skinny stems. Pismires are slow today, stunned by the cold westerly. Ben Resipole's eastern flank hunkers in shadows. The last bee is at the last scabious flower.

27th

It's harder than that. I said I'd go to the woods. Send words back. Maybe one at a time. And then the meter reader comes and he's too short. Oak. There's one word. It's a hard word. The words are metered too. Maybe I should spit them out fast: oak, alder, aspen, birch, holly. No elder yet. Maybe that's what's holding me back. No elders. We must invent it all for ourselves, just as they told us. Is it the aspens trembling in the wind or the rain hissing on the sea at Ardtoe? Pine. I can't read all the leaves of this wooden book. Instead I must add to them. How fortunate to be born human and see the leaves turn from those green shades to yellows and reds and all on the same pillar. And to smell the moulded centuries underfoot, cladding the jutting bedrock.

Then a friend calls so we talk of apple trees instead.

29th

It's also hard for me to walk about here and return with nothing in my pockets. It's frequently a leaf or a blossom for a jug or jar on the table. There are so many shades of green. Today it's three little red apples and a conker. The conker is small and is probably one overlooked by everyone else; not that many children pass this way. Adults don't bother. Conkers have the rich sheen of polished furniture. They glow in the afternoon sun. They're wealth with no work on my part, and I'm always reminded of Bashō giving the horse chestnuts of Kiso as presents to city folk. Sometimes this comes out in translation as acorns. It's the present of that autumnal wealth that's important, not the form it takes. Bashō is saying, with his simple gift, the very obvious: here's true riches. The apples are

tiny – from wilding trees, small, spherical and deep red. What promise; of course as bitter as sloes. But in cooking, they'll be transformed. What delights of apple jelly they'll make, together with the long greeny-yellow apples whose pronounced separate base, a swelling upwards, is like cumulus gathering. Those came last week, stuffed in my pockets from the tree no-one bothers about on the road to Ariundle. How can I pass over the fruits of trees' labour? They shine three times. Once in the finding, once in the cooking and at last, in the greedy devouring and savouring.

Pome: the characteristic fruit of the apple family, as an apple, pear, or quince, in which the edible flesh arises from the greatly swollen receptacle and not from the carpels.

How many years since I first read Joyce's *Pomes Penyeach*? I take it from the shelf and read from 'A Memory of The Players in a Mirror at Midnight', written in Zurich in 1917:

*Pluck forth your heart, saltblood, a fruit of tears.
Pluck and devour!*

October
4th

I should have written: zealots, followers of the Word given, sent down; not *fundamental*-ists, since there is nothing of essence about them.

Away for a couple of days in Galloway and the Ariundle apples on the cherry boards of my desk have moved from deepsea to lit suns, with a rouged blush. The leaf-chart of bloods and wines, amber and umber, golds and saffron is again surrendering to the pull of earth and its gravity, its gravitas and its fun. The odd flashpoint colour of a sycamore branch, its leaves no longer producing chlorophyll, green as the days shorten, moving beyond equinox towards solstice. Autumn always climbs sycamores a limb at a time, while the rowan's tinted, tinged everywhere. A mirror to the rowan's berries is in the scarlet dogrose hips, beamed forth and back, a recognition, a signal: the way light seduces.

In October sun Glen Tarbert wears a thick new pelt the colour of a fox. The sky's not quite the blue of a kingfisher, but this is already a halcyon day. A passing dozy buzzing fly lands on my eyebrow and I wink. I remove the fly and wink again at the conspiracy of the day.

In his poem 'Why I Am Not a Painter', Frank O'Hara, not thinking of autumn, writes: "There should be / so much more, not of orange, of / words, of how terrible orange is / and life."

Terrible perhaps, in the sense of trembling, of intensity. Certainly, the hound beside me feels it and trembles in the face of it moving around us with an intensity that drives all the woodlands, all its creatures. This hound is a graceful and supple animal, taller than a roe deer. She is a constant companion, one who makes no demands except that companionship she freely offers. We suit each other: she'll not walk unless invited, preferring rather to lie at full stretch. In fact, being lean, angular and long-limbed – bred to run, to the chase – she cannot sit down like a mere dog. She must either stand or lie down. She aristocratically ignores all dogs as a peregrine ignores the small flying birds that scold. She'll not bark except for very good reason. We are silent together in contemplation of the vastness of night. *Canes venatici*.

Tonight, somewhere over towards Creag Dhubh and the little lochans in the hills, Laga and Lochan Sligneach, the stags are bellowing. The Milky Way is all that lights our path, and the winking lights and long drone of the black plane in the dark where no airline flies.

We return, the hound and myself, to a phone message from a friend on his way to Syria, one place of his former imprisonment and torture. He's asking for my prayers. Palestinian, Muslim, stateless, lately an imam in his own play, hating imams, he says, all imams. In my prayerless fashion, I respond watchfully: a bat, probably a pipistrelle, just the one, flittering and swooping, looping over and over hard by the old rowan with its knuckled roots gripping rock outcrop.

5th

At the jetty and along, by the little wooden boathouse, there's no blue and white china fragments on the shore. The crackling blue shining of the mussel shells deceives, though. And the insides of dog whelks on the rocks, broken possibly by crows, are quietly luminescent, faint mauve and nicotine-yellow spiralling chambers. Fish jump clear of the water here, almost beneath the Miocene other-world gaze of the black cormorants on their rock, twenty four in this colony, unmoving; watching wind against the tide. The small creel boats at moorings swing and fall and rise. The parchment grey-black leaves of aspens rattle onto the shore. Acorns drop

and roll into the sea. It's how the brindled hound and I measure each day's incursion into another season.

6th

It's easy to make out the warp and weft of society here, how bards and poets are fabric, along with genealogists and story tellers. They're in fact often the same person anyway, and there's little distinction between personal history and society's doings, real or imagined. Alec Dan Henderson, of Acharacle, an uncle of my landlady, in conversation with Donald Archie MacDonald, in 1967, as recorded in *Tocher*, discusses local folk of the time of the clearances: "The people were cleared away from Ardnamurchan. And he climbed out by Beinn Shianta and saw the places where the people used to be, and the old walls which were left. There was nobody there." The *he* in this is the Doctor of Rahoy, one Dr John MacLachlan, a poet of whom Sorley MacLean writes: "...your back was strong and straight / as you went up the face of Ben Shianta / with the burden on your shoulders / of seeing the land a waste / under sheep and bracken and rushes." Alec Dan, although not a young man in 1967, may not have met John MacLachlan, who died at seventy years of age in 1874, but his memory is strong, and he sings a song from someone who had it from the Doctor of Rahoy: *Direadh a-mach ri Bein Shianta*; Climbing up Beinn Shianta. The doctor no doubt knew the Ben when its lower slopes were inhabited. The song has a verse: "And d'you think you'll find peace, with your sheep and your cattle-folds?" addressing "Grey-headed MacColl of the evil deeds" who put out the people from their place. In the same poem [Dr John MacLachlan (of Rahoy in Morvern)] Sorley MacLean also writes of "The Cameron in Bun Allt Eachain, / that rare knowledgable man, / he told about a gleam of the sun / on beautiful Morvern / in the time of its emptying and its misery." The Cameron, Alasdair Cameron, a road man, wrote elegantly in both English and Gaelic. Bun Allt Eachain is where I was walking yesterday, driven there by Alasdair Cameron's little book "Annals and Recollections of Sunart", published in 1961, in which he writes of the nearby Tigh-na-Caillich: [which] "commemorates landlord despotism, which made a harmless old woman the victim of a son's indiscretion. Why? Oh why, one may ask, should the iniquity of the son be visited on the mother – particularly when he did punishment for his crime of stealing a sheep." I was looking for the "solitary Scots pine tree, a lone sentinel which has braved many a blast" at Bun Allt Eachain; but it was gone. Later I spoke to a man

in Strontian who had known Alastair Cameron, or “North Argyll”, his pseudonym, or “North” as he was affectionately known.

The Doctor of Rahoy, born in 1804, sees the results of mid-century clearance and makes a song. The song is sung in Ardnamurchan and Morvern, where it’s heard by Alec Dan Henderson and passed on; The doctor’s story is told, also in the middle of a new century, by one of the greatest Gaelic poets. (MacLean’s note to his own poem: “Dr John MacLachlan was one of the best Gaelic poets of the nineteenth century”) MacLean also remembers the knowledge of the road man, Alasdair Cameron of Bun Allt Eachan, where I look for a Scots pine. The Annals and Recollections in its language, its feeling for people and its democracy of greatness, is as neat an encapsulation of the last 200 years in the memory of Gaels as may be found.

That long memory is abroad in this parish today in other matters – the writing of a letter apparently questioning the mental faculties of another doctor of medicine, the calling to the General Medical Council, and “enforced” resignation. The consequences of that letter divided the usually polite co-existing communities here. There may be many odious reasons for clearances and more yet for sad and bitter resignations; but those who clear are not forgotten. Painted signs, nailed to oaks and chestnut trees, hung from deer grids and rock faces read “We support Dr Buchanan” all across the two peninsulas. Recently new signs have been hung: “Backstabbers Your Day Will Come” and the single word: “Traitor”.

7th

Hill farming economics, 2007: Scottish Government subsidy per lamb slaughtered and incinerated: £15. [“a welfare disposal scheme to slaughter and render up to 250,000 light lambs that would normally be exported, but which are stuck on Scottish farms and now in an unmarketable condition because of the export ban and livestock movement restrictions”]. Abattoir prices in Dingwall: (200 mile round trip from Ardnamurchan, includes ferry) for slaughter, £17 per lamb. Slaughtered, butchered and dressed, total per lamb, £30. (Cost to farmer). No local buyers for lamb (and certainly not mutton, despite aristocratic and chef noises off). Wethers at market: £2 – £3. Wool: no market value. Cost of lamb chops in supermarket: £3.67 per kilo. Cost of grassland, per acre, per lamb, unknown. Cost of supplementary feeding, variable, but expensive. From

The Herald (October 6 2007): “The Northern Ireland Red Meat Industry Task Force, established to develop a five-to-ten-year strategy for the beef and sheep-meat industry has concluded that suckler-origin beef and hill sheep have no future. The report also concluded that it is not possible to create an economically viable production model for an efficient producer of hill sheep unless the farmgate price increases substantially to approximately £2.80 per kilo. Such conclusions are just as relevant to Scottish producers and will set alarm bells ringing in an industry already in crisis from the foot-and-mouth and blue tongue outbreaks.”

8th

All morning Ben Resipole, Creag Dhubh, Bein Bhreac and the others can't rise from the clouds. There's no Sgurr visible to the west, no pointed Viking hills of Rum – Hallival, Askival, no Ainshval to be seen. The hound lies heraldic on the heather. Over by the parish church they slash and burn rhododendron understorey, but the smoke cannot clear the canopy, tangles in branches. Sheep amble past on their journey into the subconscious. While the mist hides, it also reveals: vast moorlands of webs, each with points of water at each intersection. There are two types of spiderweb here – one is floss and largely horizontal, but with diagonal digressions and sometimes seemingly random. This is all across the bog myrtle and up high into pale birches. The other kind is the geometric spiral from one branch to another of the oak and the rowan. The spiders must have (over millennia) adjusted web building techniques to what they hoped to catch, if hope is not too far-fetched a notion in the case of a spider. Like any fisherman, the mesh is larger or smaller according to the anticipated haul. Mist also amplifies the often unheard, the unlistened to: the booming surge of the incoming tide and the crescendo of curlews. From all directions, the stags' great groans of existence, their moaning lust for life driving them. Electricity volts through the hound's lead to my hand; she's seen them first – a stag and three hinds making unhurriedly for higher ground. Her ancestors sing in her blood, she trembles lightly. In another life I would have slipped her after them and followed her uphill.

9th

To walk across the coruscating mile of the bay in October sun, between land and clear sky, is to walk on rippling quicksilver. A heron stares at a limpid and disappearing rock pool. The pure, bubbling, unworded call of flying curlews curves down to my ear. Halfway across I'm a tiny figure in reflected light, walking, walking, just one foot before the other.

a brindled hound
a lichen oak

Inside a wood, it is hard to see it for the trees which overwhelm with their forms, twisted, broken, growing one in the other. The curling holly finds shelter in the oak, rowans crawling decade on decade round the rocks send out more roots, grip tighter, a birch trunk springs back on itself in a slow double bend; a complete alphabet, a language of forms and lives. I find it hard also to see the trees for this reason. It's infinitely more complicated by the lichens and mosses. Mosses are knee deep in places and year on year take themselves further up into the trees. Where the mosses are not in evidence, the lichens bubble across trunks. Ferns, too, in the crooks formed by the reaching out of limbs. and of course, the old nurse trees will have saplings growing in them. Sometimes it's possible to see what appears to be two or even three types of leaf on the one tree until the intertwining trunks, like ivies, can be separated from the moss and the ferns by the recalcitrant eye.

In places where we wander, say at Sailean nan Cuileag, the inlet of flies, there's no such problem for the hound. She's suddenly there ahead of me on the path, her eyes undeceived and undeceiving, she follows me, now to the east, then the west, ahead, behind, plaiting around me like a sapling alongside a veteran oak. She's perfectly disguised for this woodland, soft footed, and in the October colours and light, all but invisible in her fur lines of broken amber and darker brown. We don't take the same path – she has long delicate limbs, built for the speed of the chase, which would catch in the cracks of those mossy rockfaces I scramble up and down – but we end up in the same place – she's a gaze hound: from within her grace she can see my upright lumbering form as surely as I see the bunching leathery lungwort on the oak trees we pass.

10th

FISH PRICES

Fleetwood – 22,500 kilos on the market. Witches 30p-£1; monkfish £2-£3.80; flounder 20p-60p each.

Fraserburgh – 14 boats landed 1,005 boxes. Monkfish £90-£200; witches £40-£60.

Boats – Virtuous, New Dawn, Celestial Dawn, Arcana

Peterhead, 9 boats, 2 consignments, landed 3,205 boxes. Monkfish £2.20-£3.40; witches £1-£2 each.

Boats – Lapwing, Budding Rose, Harvest Hope, Fruitful Bough, Fair Morn

I like the story I once heard of William Stafford. He said his habit was to write a poem every day. When asked how he managed to write so much, he thought a moment and answered “Some days I lower my standards.” The story may be true, is possibly apocryphal, but comes to mind writing this journal. I have too many words. What’s written here is spontaneous, I’ve nothing to lose but the words. It may be a broadcloth journal, from cutout bits from poems; the poems are the holes in the cloth from which they’ve been cut. Like the Jain image of the released spirit, a negative, since they’re not yet written. In the surrounding material are many repetitions in the pattern, like speech. What goes down here is only words. Attributed to Allen Ginsberg, (but certainly first articulated by Chogyam Trungpa, the Tibetan refugee who co-founded Samye Ling Tibetan Centre in Eskdalemuir) on spontaneity: First thoughts, best thoughts. If I think anything it’s probably: Having thoughts? Think again.

All words. I’m having a clear-out, there’s too many for my storage space. I’ve an incomplete set of oddities if anyone would like them, previously enjoyed (as car-salesmen say): unguent and ungulate. Some are words related to religion that I really should bin, like zealot and apocrypha, but they can be sold these days to newspapers. I have trouble getting out the word aspen, also, nearly always saying poplar instead. I blame Linnaeus. The botanic name of aspen is *Populus tremula*: the trembling poplar. I left a poplar for an aspen elsewhere in this journal. If you find it, it’s yours.