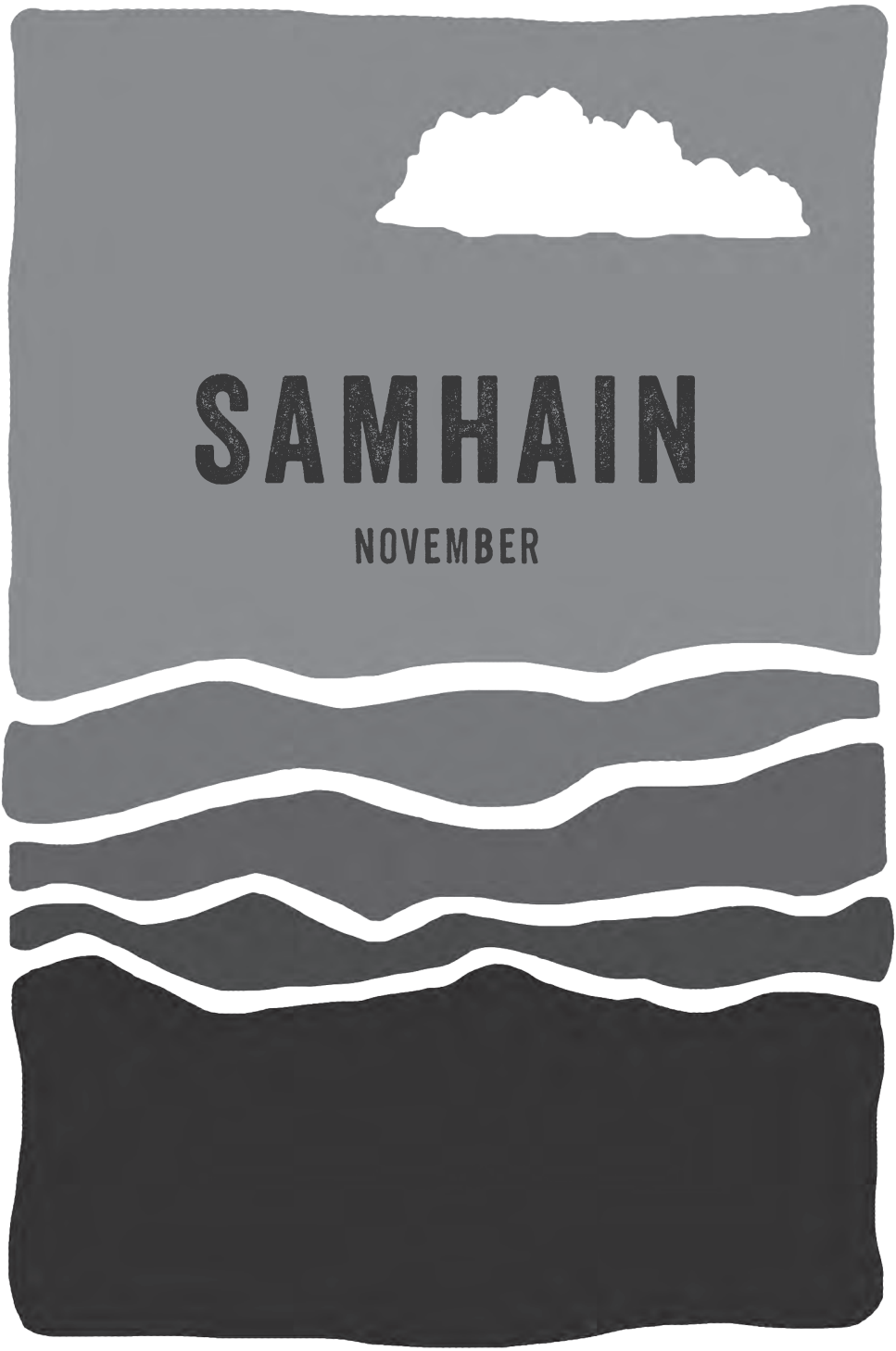
SAMHAIN
NOVEMBER

BEGINNINGS

'There is in fact a sort of harmony discoverable between the capabilities of the landscape within a circle of ten miles' radius, or the limits of an afternoon walk, and the threescore years and ten of human life. It will never become quite familiar to you.'

Henry David Thoreau

I studied my map for a while and found what appeared to be its most boring grid square. A square without road, house or river, just a single footpath, one pond, and the merest flutter of a lonely contour line. Here was nothing at all, neatly outlined within its crisp blue lines.

It was unremarkable: there was nothing to remark on. It was the ideal place to begin. If this first outing was too boring for me on my boring map, then it would certainly be too boring for you, and that would be the end of the book straightaway.

I folded up the map and headed out to have a look at nothing.

Sometime later, my car was being hauled out of a ditch by two construction workers who were too polite to tell me what a moron I was. I'd flagged down their pick-up to ask for help after my front wheel dropped off the edge of the tarmac into a void hidden by the hedge in the lay-by in which I tried to park. As their engine revved and bits of

my car crunched and cracked and fell off, I reasoned I was here to look for new experiences, so perhaps this was a good start?

I thanked the men, pocketed the car keys, squeezed through a barrier designed to keep out dirt bikers, and climbed over a block of graffitied concrete hampering incursions by vehicles or caravans. I'd never been down this way before.

Somebody had planted a row of spindly saplings along the metal fence, tied up by scruffy blue string. Who was it? There were no houses here, and it would be at least a decade before the trees amounted to much. Why had they bothered? I snapped a quick photo.

I paused again just beyond a discarded burger wrapper, this time to admire the colourful, leaf-strewn path. I took a picture of my feet among the golden leaves. The footpath stretched away into the mist beneath a gloomy archway of damp trees. I took a photo of that too. Autumn was making way for winter. It was early November, meaning that the year's cycle had just entered the period known in the ancient Celtic calendar as the dark half of the year. My breath ballooned in the air, and my fingers felt cold even in my gloves.

Celts used to mark the turning of the year with four fire festivals, midway between each equinox and solstice. Samhain was the most important of these, welcoming in the winter and the darker months. People felt anxious at the weakening sun and lit fires to help the sun on its journey across the heavens. These celebrations at the end of harvest were rowdy affairs, filled with gorging, boozing, and sacrificed cattle. Jack-o'-lanterns were carved from turnips and lit from within by glowing coal embers.

Some people took a flame from the community bonfire and carried it home to relight the fire in their own hearth. At this time of year, they believed, the separation between our world and the spirit world dissolved, allowing more interactions between the two. You can imagine their concern at the darkening days, their foreboding about the hungry months to come and the proximity of a closer supernatural realm. The fires and revelry must have been an intoxicating respite.

The customs I was looking forward to on Bonfire Night are not far removed from those pagan rituals whose bonfires and fireworks we borrowed to help us to remember, remember Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder plot. Time stretches back a long way on this small map.

Fireworks were for later, however, and this empty square still seemed unlikely to provide any. I set about trying to find something interesting to look at.

Once I can put a name to something – a bird, a tree – I seem to come across it more often, and I also appreciate it more for knowing the word.* As Robert Macfarlane wrote in *Landmarks*, 'language deficit leads to attention deficit. As we further deplete our ability to name, describe and figure particular aspects of our places, our competence for understanding and imagining possible relationships with non-human nature is correspondingly depleted.'

I intended to make a conscious effort this year to learn more about the nature around me. Addressing my language deficit and general ignorance might help my attention deficit as well, as I seemed to fritter too much of my time on being productive rather than on just being. It was my attempt to get a grip on my nature deficit disorder.

Paying attention is what teachers nagged me to do in boring lessons at school. It was time for me to walk around my map and belatedly learn how to do it. Even though I studied science at A-level and university, I learned little from formal education, and my lack of knowledge was shocking. With these weekly outings came a determination to be more observant, and to fill in some of my knowledge gaps with the help of apps and online research.

My professor today was the Seek app on my phone. It identifies plants and creatures through some unfathomable voodoo magic. I pointed my phone at a common reed, wondering what wisdom the mighty AI gods would bestow upon me. I had seen reeds countless times before but didn't know their official name. Drumroll and revelation, the technical name for the plant was… 'common reed'!

But the breakdown of its taxonomy caught my eye. For this humble reed nestled in the Family of 'Grasses', the Class of 'Monocots', the Kingdom of 'Plants' and the Domain of 'Eukarya'. The sprawling immensity of life, too complex for me ever to grasp, had been ordered and tidied and simplified for this single plant in front of me: *Phragmites australis*. This much I *could* comprehend, and from here I

**This is the Baader–Meinhof phenomenon, a frequency illusion named after a 1970s terrorist group. It is attributed to your brain looking out for the new word and then confirmation bias backing up its apparent prevalence.*

had a foundation upon which I could layer more curiosities.

The open fields of this first grid square were a similar starting point of reference on my little map, in a corner of a country that is forever England, that is in the UK (for now), Europe (ish), on planet Earth in a solar system tucked away in an outer spiral arm of the Milky Way, and on and on until my head explodes into that memorable picture from the Hubble telescope showing 265,000 galaxies (out of billions), many of which are so distant that their light has taken billions of years to reach us. It is a picture sprinkled with trillions of stars and planets and so much untold mystery.

Yet even that photograph has been obliterated by those from the new James Webb telescope, a hundred times more powerful than the Hubble, which is now peering all the way back to GLASS-z13, the oldest galaxy we have ever seen.

So while I stood on a stony path atop deep layers of late Mesozoic and Cenozoic sedimentary rocks, and gawped dumbly at a common reed, I could also open my phone to @nasawebb on Instagram and gawp humbly all the way back to light from GLASS-z13 heading our way a mere 235 million years after the Big Bang when our entire universe (this reed, this planet, this galaxy, *everything*) was as small as an apple and a temperature of a quadrillion – 1,000,000,000,000,000 – degrees!

In other words, faced with the infinite options for exploration out there, I might as well begin right here, right now, on this damp footpath.

This single map contains multitudes. If nothing else felt connected across the individual squares I visited this year, I hoped to hold onto this sudden yawning glimpse of wonder and the connection between an everyday observation and the curiosity that spins off from there if you look at it from a fresh angle or listen to experts.

So now the questions started to come. Who came to this isolated spot to graffiti badly, and why? Who built this bench here from two stumps of birch and a hefty plank? Who laid down a bed of wood chippings around the bench, which was now dotted with crooked brown mushrooms? Who made the effort to gravel a small path over to this bench and cut branches to line the path and peg them down?

I wiped the bench dry with my sleeve, sat down and rummaged for the flask of coffee in my rucksack. I pulled my hood up over my woolly

hat and sipped the drink for its warmth rather than the caffeine. My brain was buzzing quite enough as it was. I stared into the damp fog and was struck by another question, more pressing than the others: why had someone put a bench right in front of a tangle of brambles and a massive pylon?

But then I spotted a small plaque, inscribed to Brian, 'a tireless campaigner for the canal', and I realised I was looking at this all wrong. What I should have been looking at from the bench was behind me. I swivelled round to face the other way and then saw things differently. What I'd dismissed as a stagnant ditch was, in fact, an overgrown canal in the early stages of restoration. There were tall bullrushes like hot-dogs on sticks, feathery reeds, blood-red hawthorn berries and a spiked metal security fence.

It was apparent now what I had missed before. The scrub had been cleared to allow a view of the canal from the bench. It wasn't exactly paradise, but this was a framed view of nature, history, conservation, and community all rolled in together.

Brian's bench, and the evident fondness and appreciation for this place that had inspired it, gave me permission to cherish this view too. And as I sipped my coffee, I felt weirdly thrilled to be here on this murky, chilly November morning.

While I was taking all this in, a plump man in his fifties cycled

down the canal path in hi-vis, the tyres on his bike squashed rather flat. Tom Waits' unmistakable gravel voice played from a speaker on the handlebars, and the cyclist sang along as he rode past without spotting me.

'*I never saw the morning 'til I stayed up all night.*'

I smiled at the break in the silence.

'*I never saw my hometown until I stayed away too long.*'

There was little movement or birdsong in the air as I finished my coffee, just the sounds of a forklift truck in the industrial yard beyond the canal, reversing beeps, and a rattling train somewhere in the distance. Nature seemed subdued in the morning mist.

It feels ridiculous to admit this, but I still had not actually entered my first grid square. I was foiled from getting into it by a drainage ditch that was too wide for me to risk leaping over in my wellies. I was forced to retrace my steps and to try another way. While walking back down the lane, I picked up the burger wrapper I had ignored earlier. I already cared more for this place.

I pushed through a narrow gap between some bushes and a chain-link fence onto a narrow footpath, taking care not to snag my coat. At last, I was finally into my grid square and ready to begin this challenge! I followed the hemmed-in path until I reached a gap by a fallen fencepost. I stepped over the tangled loops of wire and dropped down a wooded slope to a stagnant green pool. The surface was covered in duckweed, a tiny, quick-spreading plant that I later learnt was being tested in the US as a stage of treatment for human sewage.

It was peaceful down there among the hawthorn bushes; a no-man's-land of Carlsberg Export cans, wedged between a railway line, industrial units, marshland and a Ministry of Defence firing range. Nobody knew I was here. Nobody I knew had ever been here. I didn't know why anyone else would ever have come here, though the crushed beer cans, like proprietorial flags claiming mountain summits, showed I was not stepping into uncharted territory. I stirred the pond with a stick and its mysteries bubbled up from the black depths and stank like a cauldron.

I checked my location using the map app on my phone, picked an apple from a tree by the railway line and popped it into my rucksack for later. Then I climbed into a field and waded through wet, knee-deep grass, among what Seek taught me were yellow common toadflax

flowers and purple thistles bejewelled with droplets of dew and strands of silk webs.

I headed towards the grazing meadows of the drained marshland that made up most of today's 'empty' grid square. Gigantic electricity pylons marched across the land and the grey sky was striped with lines of cables running from the old coal-fired power station down on the coast. The building had fallen foul of new environmental laws and the plant was decommissioned, including blowing up the enormous chimney, which must have been a very satisfying morning's work.

The 200-metre-tall chimney gained some notoriety back in the Noughties when protesters climbed it to paint 'GORDON, BIN IT', a message to Prime Minister Brown. But they were served a High Court injunction before they got any further than a colossal 'GORDON'. The activists admitted trying to shut down the station, but argued that their damaging actions were to prevent climate change causing greater damage to the world.

Nobody had used this claim before in a 'lawful excuse' defence. An Inuit leader supported them with evidence that climate change was affecting his way of life. And *The New York Times* featured the eventual lawful-excuse acquittal in its annual list of life-changing influential ideas.

Beneath the pylons, the land was strikingly flat. I could see an elevated rampart far in the distance, beyond this square, protecting the marsh from the wide river that fanned out towards the estuary. A silhouetted pony grazed on the grass bank, and a dirt bike revved up and down it, having somehow found a way around the preventive barriers. The noise, the movement and the human all seemed incongruous on this empty morning as I watched a ship slide down the river behind the rampart, heading out to sea with smoke streaming from its funnel.

'Where are you going?' I called out to the vessel. Which foreign port will you make landfall in? What will you see there? How will it smell? What café will the crew go to for a beer and a smoke to stretch their legs upon arrival? I used to travel to those far-off ports, and contemplating the prospect of being stuck here for a year made me wonder if I was missing out. I continued walking my rough lap of the grid square, heading down towards its third corner.

One feature marked on the map was a tiny mound that had been

awarded its own diddy contour ring, a whopping five metres above sea level. It looked nothing more than a grassy wrinkle on the flat counterpane of the marsh. But the internet told me it was an ancient barrow, a Bronze Age burial site constructed over a stone coffin that once contained a crouched skeleton and a necklace of beads made from fossilised sponges. Those stories from thousands of years ago added a sense of awe to the innocuous mound and its empty metal cattle trough.

From my vantage point on the 'hill' I looked over a field of black cows and another of white sheep. The fields were separated by drainage dykes rather than the fences, hedges or walls I was more accustomed to. The livestock were the only clue that this drained marsh was anything other than forgotten ground, in-between ground, left-behind ground. The animals play an important role in maintaining it and preventing it from being engulfed in scrub.

Two crows swooped overhead, calling out as they tumbled and rolled through the cold grey sky. Were they courting? Fighting? Playing? I could hear them swoosh as they dropped. I heard, also, the creaky wings of a pair of lumbering white swans flying by, then the begrudging, cranky take-off of a heron whose frog-hunting I disturbed in a ditch covered in neon-green algae.

I was hungry now, appreciative of the apple I'd pocketed earlier. It was huge, red and flecked with yellow. Lemony sunlight was burning off the morning's mist. The apple's crunch sounded loud in the quietness. I saw the distinctive swoop of a woodpecker and listened for its laughing call. Less easy to identify was either a weasel or a stoat that scurried across my path and disappeared like magic into the long grass. They do say that telling the two apart is simple: a weasel is weasily identifiable, whereas a stoat is stoatally different…

And that brought me back to where I began, the lap of my square complete, but now with a dinged car, a bunch of photographs, and a whirlwind of first impressions. I finished the sweet apple and tossed the core into the hedge. I had pages of notes to begin exploring on the internet when I got back home.

I had selected the most empty-looking location to begin my journey, on a map of an area I'd often dismissed as boring. But what I came away with, knowing that 399 grid squares still potentially awaited, was a sense of abundance and possibility.

There was a clear correlation between how much I had observed today and how much I enjoyed the outing. The government's Foresight programme, which looks at how to improve mental capital and mental well-being, set out five actions to improve personal well-being. These were:

Connect
Be active
Take notice
Keep learning
Give

That is, if you'll allow me to label this book as giving back what I discovered, a perfect summary of what I was hoping I might accomplish in this year – an abundance of new places to connect with, of things to learn, and of beauty to observe, if I kept active and paid sufficient attention. It was a fine beginning.