

## Chapter One

# First Syllables

*I like to go outside and paint pictures in the early spring. I suppose it's my way of trying to be a tulip, pushing my way out of the tight white bulb of winter and opening a little color against the drabness.*

Ted Kooser,  
*Seasons in the Bohemian Alps*  
(University of Nebraska Press, 2002)

THE LAND IS PATCHED with frozen and slowly thawing snow, depending on whether it lies in shadow or sunlight. Ben Ledi, this Stirlingshire landscape's symbolic pyramid, seen through a waving screen of bare birches, has been whitened and softened and curved and blunted by masses of snow that fleeced the mountains in the night. Far below, Loch Venachar lies in a *contre-jour* dwam, its surface mimicking sky colours – iciest blue, various greys, white and gold – and contriving to hurl fragments of all of these up the hillside, so that it looks as if sky and loch and land have been daubed by the same brush, that this portion of the Earth has been unified by nature in colour and texture and purpose. Paul Cézanne would do just that in his later years, flooding his

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canvasses of Mont Sainte-Victoire with daring bravado, and from foreground to middle ground to mountaintop and on into the sky, the whole patched with the same few shades of greens, yellows and blues, and leaving just enough canvas unpainted to insinuate flecks of brightness on mountaintop and cloud. He wrote then:

*I become more lucid in front of nature...but I cannot attain the intensity which unfolds to my senses. I don't have the magnificent richness of colouration which animates nature.*

And:

*Art is a harmony parallel to nature.*

And his biographer, Alex Danchev (*Cézanne – A Life*, Profile Books, 2012), wrote:

*Harmony, like beauty, was being redefined.*

So, on a February afternoon of can't-possibly-be-spring-yet, the ghost of Cézanne bestrides this living hillside between Loch Venachar and Ben Ledi, animating nature, redefining its harmony and beauty by flooding its canvas with a limited palette that does not discriminate from foreground to loch to mountaintop and on into the sky. The result is a landscape fizzing with energy. But is it spring?

A bare, half-folded-fan-shaped rowan tree cuts through a low hill skyline so that its many-branched crown arcs against the sky and reveals the neat and placid silhouette

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of a vertically perched kestrel clasped to the topmost inch of the topmost twig. For the next five minutes it is utterly motionless (and for how long before I first saw it?), while the sky behind and above jigs and reels where wind and sun and cloud and blue and unpainted scraps of canvas conspire to create the appropriate setting to show it off. But the kestrel's preoccupation is the land below the tree, and that land is all pale gold and straw-shaded grasses, liberally patched with snow that gleams with hints of all those sky shades.

The bird throws its wings wide, raises its tail, and a shudder goes through it, and when that subsides it has realigned its stance from vertical to horizontal, and in the process it has revealed itself as a female kestrel, and now she too has redefined harmony and beauty. She will fly any moment.

She flies west. West is my direction, too, but more slowly now, for she is ahead of me, and I would like to encounter her again as we trace our parallel contours across the hillside.

She is not hard to find. She's there beyond the next small rise in the land. She perches on air now. Every feather and nerve-end is a-flicker, apart from her head, which is the still centre of her world. She steps down a yard from her perch, she banks, chooses a new course, urges forward into the west wind. I never saw a raptor that did not prefer to hunt into the wind. It is as true of thrush-sized merlins as it is of eagles, as it is of kestrels. Facing the wind achieves control. A tail wind brings chaos, unless the bird's ambition is to cover a lot of ground without the need for control. A hunting kestrel is precise. She will wheel onto a tail wind only when she reaches her own idea of the edge of her territory or her

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comfort zone, and then she may well surge all the way back to where she started, and there, if she's still hungry, she may turn and start again.

She keeps pace with me for about a mile. Several times I will overtake her because she is head-down in mid-hover, but sooner or later she reappears going west, going past me, always below me, always rising somewhere beyond to hold up against the sky again, intimately coupled to the wind. Finally, fruitlessly, she whips round in not much more than her own length and barges away east, downwind.

The path is comparatively new and has made a neat, deliberate breach in a drystone dyke that crosses it at right angles. It is not the first breach, and they are not all this neat, for the dyke wears the forlorn expression of the redundant and disregarded. But it inclines away uphill towards a wooded little crag down which shivers a muttering burn, and it reads like an invitation: "This way." The snow patches lie thicker there, ensnared by tussocks, a neatly stitched seam all the way up the shadowed side of the dyke. The burn's voice grows louder, blends into the fractured, percussive rhythms of a half-hearted waterfall hidden somewhere up there in the trees that crowd the crag and the low ground beneath. This hillside is full of these little dens, the gorges of their burns steep enough to discourage the grazing tribes throughout the centuries of careless farming that held sway hereabouts. But this land is in the hands of Woodland Trust Scotland now, and evidence of new native woodland planting is everywhere. A long, slow process of healing has begun, which is why I come often. So much of our relationship with nature is conducted in an atmosphere

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of battlefield; I greet these reprieved and resurrecting acres with over-emotional regard. The forgiveness of nature always moves me. It rises to accept this extended helping hand, and its response swarms all over this land, a freewheeling generosity.

Up near the crag, the dyke is taller and more intact. A level square yard of hillside at its base offers a seat, a backrest and a windbreak. My backpack offers coffee and biscuits. The sound of the unseen waterfall rushes into the void left by silenced footsteps and stillness. Settle for a while. The view faces east. A tall, slender birch of singular elegance distinguishes the middle distance. It leans away from its hillside, but then ten feet above the ground it begins to curve gently back until it achieves something slightly past vertical and (to my un-birch-like eye) perfect balance. My eye lingers there not just because of the beauty of the solitary tree, but also because the sun alights fitfully on a distant hill called Uam Mhor, and quite by chance my choice of a seat has put the birch and the hill on precisely the same sightline. But the sun is on the hill, and not the birch, so the vivid snow gleam of the hill appears from behind and therefore apparently from *within* the birch. The tree is lit from within.

What was it you said, M. Cézanne?

*I become more lucid in front of nature...but I cannot attain the intensity which unfolds before my senses.*

I think perhaps I know how you feel.

Then, quite unannounced, the unambiguous voice of spring: it creeps into the edges of consciousness as if from

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far off, but it cannot be far off. It infiltrates the predominance of the waterfall, even though it is much quieter, yet because its pitch is much higher and occasionally strident, it finds ways through the sound-screen of the fall, through the gaps in its acoustic limitations. Somewhere above the fall, high in the crag's highest trees, a mistle thrush sings. Has it just begun, or has it been singing all along and it has taken time for me to tune in to the changed circumstances created by the angle of the dyke and the crag? The song reaches me in short, staccato phrases, often tapering away to silence, one diminuendo after another, and further fragmented because from time to time the fall drowns it out. But listen. If you like your harbingers well-toned, jazzily inventive and far-carrying, accompanied by coffee *al fresco* and a birch tree performing passable impressions of the burning bush, and if you are willing to turn a blind eye or two to the snow-patched land...then here on this Cézanne-animated February late afternoon, these are the first syllables of spring.

The singer is an un-mated male. And while it's true that you can sometimes hear him on a fine afternoon of late December, and at any time in January, these are moments of overture. But this, this is song for the sake of song, an advertisement, yes, but also an outpouring of intent, a declaration that winter is lost and irretrievable now. It is the first day of mistle thrush spring.

My mood suffuses. It permeates hillside and drystone dyke (which moulders day by day at nature's prodding and urging, regressing back into hillside). It permeates tree, crag, waterfall, thrush, song. The process of grafting on to nature's

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late afternoon hour slowly creeps beyond mind, beyond senses, becomes physical, becomes bodily. The thing is to be *of the land*, to breathe in unison, to keep its peace.

On and on the thrush.

On and on the waterfall.

On and on the solitary birch, silvering the air.

These are the golden moments. They let me in, and briefly, I belong.



Something about the birch.

What?

What changed?

Why does it suddenly snap into sharp focus as if it has just wandered up the hill this moment, to stand there and adopt that leaning, curving pose? It has not moved, of course. It has not become more silvery. Its shadow has not deepened. But where its many-branched crown arcs against the sky, it reveals the neatly folded silhouette (clasped to the topmost inch of the topmost twig) of the very same vertically perched kestrel. And I never saw her arrive. How long has she been there?

On and on the fall.

On and on the thrush.

But the kestrel's reappearance unsettles me. It concludes a circle. And the knowledge creeps in with the thickening dusk that I belong beyond it.