

The Day Begins with Hunger

I rise before dawn. Pulling on my wellies and waterproof jacket, I step out of the warm Welsh farmhouse, torch in hand, a beam of light cutting through the darkness. I make my way down the hill to a wooded field beside a stream, where two hutches shelter five Brecon Buff geese. Filling a pail with feed. I unbolt the doors, and the plump geese burst forth, wings flapping, necks craning, hissing and honking as they gather around then breakfast. An earthy scent wafts from the straw-lined huts.

Next, I head to the barn to fill a saucepan with sheep nuts. Despite my best efforts to be quiet, the sheep a fluffy flock of Ryeland ewes - have already gathered by their trough. As I pour the feed, they jostle around me, eager to get their share. I check their water, replenish their hay, and then continue on to the upper field, where an electric fence encloses the living quarters of two call ducks, three hens, a single goose and a vocal cockerel.

Grain is deployed, water is refreshed, the two huts are opened and the birds surge towards their bowls with urgency.

Back at the farmhouse, several cats have congregated and wait their turn with varying degrees of patience. Only once they have all been fed and watered do I turn my attention to my own desires - a steaming cup of black coffee, some fresh fruit and a few morning pages in the diary.

I first came to Cefnmachllys in winter as a house sitter. I brought in a solitary and joyful new year at this rural 17th century farmstead overlooking the Bannau Brycheiniog, tending to the animals and wandering in the mountains. I would walk all afternoon in the drizzle, come back before dusk to return the birds to their houses, make sure the sheep were accounted for and offer the cats some sustenance, before building a fire in one of the woodburners in the old stone hearths.

My days were structured by hunger, the animal rhythms of appetite and rest.

I have come to understand hunger, desire, as the organising principle of life. Life reaches for more life. Oak trees extend their leaf-covered branches to the sky for sunlight, their roots to the soil for water and mycelial connection. Everyone needs to eat, and food takes many forms. I seek the experience of serving other beings as a kind of nourishment.

In the summer I return to the formerly rain-drenched fields to find them sun soaked, green and lush. Skylarks sing overhead in the long evening light. I plant baby hawthorn trees with my hosts, Sam and Helena, who

have become my friends. Accompanied by their two-year-old daughter Eira, I clear overgrown strawberry beds, revealing tender plants and nestling them in straw. Eira's first word was 'wow'. It is still one of her favourite words. She toddles around in the garden saying: 'wow...wow...wow'.

One afternoon we walk through long grasses in a meadow adjacent to the farmhouse and conceal ourselves within a copse, near an earthen ridge housing an ancient badger sett. We wait in silence until the badgers emerge. A group of youngsters play. They tussle and tumble on the hillside. I imagine the vast network of underground tunnels and chambers stretching below us an invisible subterranean system, home to many generations, past, present and future.

That night, beneath a sky filled with stars, Sam and I don headlamps and boots and make our way to the stream to look for white-clawed crayfish. He often goes down to the water at night, seeking their lobster-like forms amongst the stones and pebbles. They are an important keystone species, Sam says. They bring otters up the river. Their presence is reassuring, a demonstration of the river's health. Their absence is ominous, a sign of agricultural pollution and ecological disruption.

We enter the water and slowly walk upstream, calf-deep in the current, scanning the rocky riverbed with our headlamps. It takes a while, but Sam finally spots a crayfish and summons me with a wave of his arm. And then we find another. They are pale and luminous in our torchlight. Sam is relieved. He tells me that, judging by their size, the little one hatched only a few months ago, while the larger one might be ten years old.

The following morning, Sam and I collect samples from the stream and test them as part of a citizen science project monitoring water quality in the Wye. I see the many ways in which he and his family are guardians of the place where they live. By paying attention. By having roots.

I will find myself thinking often about the nocturnal drift of crayfish in the stream, the badgers and my friends in their respective homes that are centuries old. When severe floods affect Wales, I'll hear from Sam that whole sections of riverbank have been washed away and he is worried about the crayfish burrows.

After a convivial dinner at Cefnmachllys, Helena opens a tin of home-made rushlights, traditional candles crafted from rushes soaked in tallow. Once a simple and affordable source of illumination, rushlights were commonplace in historic homes across the British Isles, many of which still feature metal wall fixtures designed to hold them. We gather around a long wooden table and light a slender candle. It glows with a warm, clear brilliance, entirely different from the harsh white hum of electric bulbs.

For 20 minutes, the length of time it takes for the rushlight to go out. I reflect on how sunshine fed the hungry grass and rushes, how hungry cows grazed on that grass, and how humans made candles from the fat of the cows and the dried stems of plants, because they were hungry for sunlight in the middle of the night.