

## CHAPTER TWO

### BEHOLDING

*Jake's Story ~ 'The Lost Valley'*

*It is part of the photographer's job to see more intensely than most people do. He must have and keep in him something of the receptiveness of the child who looks at the world for the first time or of the traveller who enters a strange country.<sup>27</sup>*

Bill Brandt

I am walking up the valley. Ahead of me lie the brooding peaks of the Langdale Pikes, at the heart of the Cumbrian mountains. All around the sound of water fills the air. Streams tumble down the steep slopes like children giddy with the thrill of gravity. At the bottom of the valley the waters meet. A shimmering silver ribbon marks the place where two great masses of land touch. Here the moving moment meets the stillness of all that has been before. We are all, each one of us, like this valley. An ancient landscape meeting a moment of becoming. A place where past and present meet.

It's been two hours since I left the village below. I have a long walk ahead of me. Enfolded and turned under, I am a detail woven into the fabric of this intimate place. A light rain begins to fall. Softly. In this moment if you were to offer me a helicopter ride to the summit, I would not take it. For with every step I can feel my senses opening. The tired accumulations of thought and image

are being washed away like dust in the rain. Each move forward stretches the experience of seeing in time, lapping layer upon layer of impression, like paint on the canvas of my being. What I see becomes saturated, alive and particular. I begin to remember what it feels like to see with a naked eye.

Walking in nature, I have learned the first principal of perceptive insight: To see afresh, our vision needs to be undressed by time. Through gradual acquaintance, our preconceptions fall to the floor, as though removed by an invisible lover. Unclad, our eyes begin to see beyond recognition. We become ‘the child who looks at the world for the first time... the traveller who enters a strange country.’

In her book *The Living Mountain*, Scottish nature writer and poet Anna (Nan) Shepherd reflects on the effect of seeing through time. Walking for hours, sometimes days, in the Cairngorm mountains, she notices how gradually her perception deepens so that:

*The eye sees what it didn't see before, or sees in a new way what it had already seen. So the ear, the other senses [...] These moments come unpredictably, yet governed, it would seem, by a law whose working is dimly understood.*<sup>28</sup>

This strikes me as a beautiful description of seeing through gradual acquaintance. We see what we ‘didn't see before’ and we see ‘in a new way’.

Rooted in the Latin *gradus*, meaning ‘step’, the word ‘gradual’ refers to something coming into fullness over time, step by step. So walking is a natural metaphor for the art of perceptive vision. In search of insight, we leave the shores of the familiar and travel into ‘a strange country’, hoping to return with a deeper vision to the land of more familiar forms.

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The practice of drawing also teaches us about seeing through time. In his book *The Zen of Seeing*, artist Frederick Franck explains that drawing is for him a way to sustain attention, so that a subject can be seen afresh:

*I have learned that what I have not drawn, I have never really seen, and that when I start drawing an ordinary thing, I realise how extraordinary it is, sheer miracle.*<sup>29</sup>

As a student at Camberwell College of Art, I was taught how to see afresh through the practice of ‘blind contour drawing.’ Originally defined by the art teacher Kimon Nicolaides in his 1941 book *The Natural Way to Draw*, this approach entails making a continuous mark through close, intense and sustained observation of the contours that define a subject. As students we were encouraged to draw without taking our eyes off the subject to look at the drawing. Holding our attention moment to moment in this way opened up a radical shift in perception. Following the contour of our subject, millimetre by millimetre, we increasingly began to trust in the directness of our seeing. Gone were the glib marks of preconception and in their place we began to make intimate drawings that reflected the immediate presence of the subject. Seeing gradually, we discovered that what lay before us was always more remarkable, more particular, more magical than we could ever have preconceived.

Revelation happens within the seer rather than within the subject seen, for it is the sensitivity of the beholder that is awakened through a sustained acquaintance. The ‘sheer miracle’ of an ordinary thing, or an ordinary person, becomes evident through our seeing becoming undressed by time. Seeing in this way is intimate, tender and surprising.

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