BEGINNING

I set out on my journey in pure love.

She is old now. At eighty-four, she begins to feel something in her bones, to clear and tidy her things, to see a long way. Her thick hair is caught back in the familiar bun, iron grey and wavy except where it turns to a pure white around her face, ruddy with life, lined and loose as a beloved map. Strong, knotted hands open a forgotten drawer, fingers move papers, fall on a typed manuscript. She takes it to a garden chair above the river and reads. By the end, the light has changed, and all colour gathered to the western hills. Beyond, lies the mountain.

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It was 1977 and Nan Shepherd was not finished. For the first time in years, she took out a fresh sheet of paper. 'Thirty years in the life of a mountain is nothing – the flicker of an eyelid.' So began her foreword to *The Living Mountain*, her slim but boundless book about the Cairngorms range of Scotland. That was the length of time between her first writing the text and publishing it, and, along with recording the changes in that period, she affirmed the enduring validity of her original account. Another forty-five years have passed

since then; another mere blink for the massif, another cycle of change and, now, another woman charting its story.

In 2019, I was writer-in-residence for the Cairngorms National Park, which allowed me to explore the richness of the territory – both in movement and words. During that time, I found myself returning frequently to Shepherd's work. Just like the mountains at its heart, her book continues to offer new discoveries, new ways of walking, writing and wondering, new understandings of what it means to be. *The Living Mountain* is famously difficult to classify, defying genre at its time and ever since. It is mountain literature, but not about mountaineering; it is an account of walking, but without routes; it is a field guide, but spurns taxonomy; it offers portraits of people, but glories in solitude; it is politically aware, but resists manifesto; it is philosophy, but without argument. It is what we now call nature writing, though is as much about the nature of life as the life of nature. A deeply personal account of one woman's long 'traffic of love' with one mountain range, it has become a universal testament to the journey into meaning.

The Hidden Fires is an account of my pilgrimage deeper into the Cairngorms and my own sense of being, with Nan Shepherd as invisible friend: walking guide, writing tutor and fellow wonderer. I have followed in her footsteps and, like her, have not confined specific locations to specific chapters, but allowed the narrative to wander across the range and the ideas, in the same all-embracing spirit. After this opening, the twelve chapter titles are hers, but in a different order, as befits my different journey, though we converge on the last one. Throughout, I have sought to inhabit her experience – as her text invites us to do – but rather than as an actor playing out a script, I have drawn from her words to animate my own story on the great stage of the Cairngorms, discovering our intersections and divergences, our places of one mind and

our points of departure. I think it would have pleased her to know that she became for me 'the perfect hill companion'. Such a person, she wrote, 'is the one whose identity is for the time being merged in that of the mountains, as you feel your own to be'. Writing this book felt like a quiet, expansive conversation across time with her, a very different woman, about a place that has shaped us both.

Her tie to this place was a world apart from mine. Nan Shepherd was a born and bred Scot who lived in the same house in a village just west of Aberdeen until her final months in a nursing home. 'I've had the same bedroom all my life!' she cheerfully announced to an interviewer on a tour of her home when she was elderly. A significant aspect of all her writing – a body of work that includes fiction and poetry – is how grounded it is in her context and how profoundly she understood it, both in landscape and culture. Her three modernist novels, published in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were all set in rural North East communities, employing the local Scots dialect in ways that were progressive at the time, and her poetry collection, *In the Cairngorms*, was, true to title, predominantly about these mountains. Finally, *The Living Mountain*, her last publication and only major non-fiction work, bears powerful witness to the breadth of her knowledge about the area, from geology and climate to flora, fauna and people.

Along with her rootedness, one of the many remarkable things about Shepherd is her lack of narrowness. She travelled with keen curiosity to South Africa and several countries in Europe. More than that, her awareness travelled around the globe and over time in her voracious reading, her prolific correspondence and her enquiring mind. Though anchored in one place, she had wide experience and a broad vision. The two dimensions shaped each other. 'Islands are united by the bottom of the sea,' she wrote in the epigraph to *In*

the Cairngorms. I have the sense that I could have talked with her about almost anything and she would have invariably been interested and probably know more than me, but never show it off. She was not the showing-off type.

I began this book in March 2020 at the beginning of the Covid lockdown. In the early months of the virus, it was often said that we had not experienced a challenge on this scale since the Second World War. Poignant then, to know that is exactly when Shepherd did her own writing about the Cairngorms. 'In that disturbed and uncertain world,' she wrote, 'it was my secret place of ease.' I know exactly what she means, except there were key differences. Even though it will take a long time to measure the final cost of the pandemic – in loss of life, economic recession and widespread distress – it remains an entirely different beast to six years of global violence and all that followed. The origins of the virus and our response to it are both fraught with human failing, but they do not arise from the urge to dominate or exterminate other people. I believe that what Shepherd and her contemporaries lived through, in two world wars, must have been more destructive to hope and a sense of humanity, so I do not pretend to place our experiences on a par, but simply to reflect on how nature meets us in a time of crisis. Equally, the irony is not lost on me that the virus is a manifestation of nature, in the same way as the anopheles mosquito and cancer. One of our existential challenges is the fact that nature is not always beautiful or benign, and our relationship with it is frequently marked by struggle. Another challenge is to live the truth that we, too, are of nature and not separate from it.

There is a further significant difference between Shepherd's experience and mine. Even though it was war, she was able to take to the hills, but as I wrote the first pages, we had been in lockdown for a fortnight and asked not to go up

mountains. It was counter-intuitive, especially for those of us who, like Shepherd, seek these places for restoration. But the Mountain Rescue and emergency services could not use resources helping people lost and injured up hills when there was a medical emergency across the country, nor place themselves at risk of close contact. That was understandable and necessary. It was also extremely tough on people in cities. The whole pandemic was hardest on those in urban areas and, particularly, as always, on the poor.

While Nan Shepherd lived on the south-eastern side of the Cairngorms with the River Dee flowing near her house, I am over the mountains to the north-west, on the banks of the Spey. My lockdown exercise trips took me up a small hill, into forest and beside the river and loch. Although I longed for the chance to get into the higher hills again, I learned how much there was yet to discover on my home ground and along familiar trails, if only I took long enough to notice.

Walking through the pine woods just five minutes from my house, I knelt down for the first time to look closely at the moss, then couldn't resist sinking my fingers into its soft pile. As a child, Shepherd lay down on her stomach beside her father, exploring together the entwined strands of stagmoss, or 'toadstails', as they called them. 'Though I did not know it then,' she wrote, 'I was learning my way in, through my own fingers, to the secret of growth.' The moss that I explored, spread in pale green heaps around the foot of the trees, was also made up of hundreds of feathery strands, each one delicate and leafed, together forming a soft pillow that can be a water-logged mass after rain or, like that day, dry and downy. It was unusually warm for April and the sun bright, so I flopped back on it and looked up.

Shepherd was intensely interested in perspective and what happens to our experience of landscape when we physically change how we see it. 'By so simple a matter . . . as altering

the position of one's head, a different kind of world may be made to appear.' Suddenly, in the forest a stone's throw from my home, I had entered a different world. The tall, slender trunks of the Scots pines were like columns of an ancient palace, reaching up to an azure canopy. But it was a living palace, swaying quietly, each trunk circling above its still roots as the branches touched and brushed one another, whispering. High up in the tiers of green, invisible birds were piping in high notes. Higher still, a waning moon floated like a watermark against the blue, only half there, dreaming of night.

'It will take a long time to get to the end of a world that behaves like this if I do no more than turn round on my side or my back,' said Shepherd. Like her, I'm learning that the slower I go and the longer I take over a small patch of land, the more it opens itself to me. But the more it exposes my own ignorance, too. I did not know the names of those birds in the pine forest, or the kind of moss I rested on. And while I did not need to know their names to enjoy them, now having stopped to notice them properly, having experienced them with my full attention and discovered the pleasure of their existence, I found a yearning to know them better. French philosopher Simone Weil wrote that 'attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity'. It means we give of ourselves entirely to the person or object of our focus, and, in the observing, curiosity grows. Who are you, birds? What are you singing about? Are you always here or, like me, a migrant?

Unlike Shepherd, who knew this place so deeply, I am a newcomer. Born in Kathmandu, I had a nomadic upbringing across Nepal, India, Pakistan and Australia, the country of my first passport. My father counted sixty moves before I was nineteen, and quite apart from the buildings, we moved through strikingly different environments. Much of my

childhood was in the Himalayan foothills of Nepal, with their high altitudes, forests, villages and terraced fields. It instilled my love of mountains from the beginning. Stays in India included the hill station at 7,000 feet in Uttarakhand where I went to school, the central plains of Maharashtra and the crowded, colourful cities of Visakhapatnam, Delhi, Lucknow, Kolkata and Amritsar. In Pakistan, we lived in Sindh province, which encompasses both the fertile Indus river valley and the dust storms and blistering temperatures of the Thar desert. Even our furloughs in Australia were itinerant, traversing from coastal areas to the hinterland, big cities to bush, Victoria's Antarctic weather fronts to Queensland's tropics.

As a missionary family, there was never money to spare, yet the experience of all these environments was rich beyond measure and I never underestimate that privilege. At the same time, it means I do not know any one place with the expertise of a life-long dweller. I have always communed with the natural world – like lying down in the those pine woods – but my response was a simple, sensory enjoyment rather than the naturalist's drive to identify and record. It is only in recent years that delight has deepened into a desire for greater knowledge, especially of the place where I now live – the Cairngorms – and especially since discovering *The Living Mountain*.

Though the book is today hailed as a masterpiece of mountain literature, Shepherd was not considered a 'mountaineer', certainly not by herself. This is perhaps because by the time the book was published, she was eighty-four and had never gained recognition in the mountaineering community. It also reflects the distinction for many that the term 'mountaineer' is reserved for those requiring ropes, while everyone else is a 'walker'. I doubt any of that mattered to her. Once over the initial draw of the summits, she did not

go to the Cairngorms for sport or to prove athletic prowess, but to enjoy being in them. 'The mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to be with the mountain as one visits a friend, with no intention but to be with him.' She'd hated sports at school, which at her time was called 'drill' and consisted mainly of marching and exercises with clubs that had distinctly military overtones. This was deliberate, the government having decided that British losses in the Boer wars were partly down to inadequate fitness, thus tasking schools with raising tougher soldiers.

As for me, I enjoyed school sport, particularly running, which I still do, but was never good with a ball and am definitely an 'also-ran'. And I have similar feelings to Shepherd about heading into the hills. Though 'Munro bagging' – setting out to climb all of Scotland's mountains over 3,000 feet – is a perfectly worthy pursuit, the box-ticking doesn't interest me, nor am I fit enough for the races that charge across this landscape. I don't go climbing with ropes and am, at best, wobbly on skis.

In Shepherd, then, I have found a kindred spirit – a bookish, mid-life woman of no exceptional skills, who simply loves to be in mountains. We're not a rare breed. I find it heartening how many people love both literature and wilderness, the interior, book-lined shelter of libraries and the wide-open landscapes of the hills. Shepherd describes, as a child, looking at the Cairngorms from the neighbouring Monadhliath hills with longing. 'Climbing Cairngorms was then for me a legendary task, which heroes, not men, accomplished. Certainly not children.' But as she walks into them in adulthood, and grows more and more familiar, she ends up so at home that she can fall asleep on their wide flanks with nothing but sky for a tent. Though I have come to the Cairngorms from a very different background and bring

a different perspective, like her I am not a mountaineer but a mountain *stravaiger*, a great old Scots word for someone who 'wanders about'.

When not wandering the Cairngorms, Shepherd's life was steeped in literature. Having studied it at the University of Aberdeen, she taught it for all her professional life at the Aberdeen School of Education, training teachers. She loved her work and told friends she would never give up her job, even in the brief window when her writing was successful. It is now widely accepted that she did not receive the sustained recognition she deserved for her novels. Though on publication they won glowing reviews, comparisons with Virginia Woolf and a place at the table of the Scottish literary renaissance, her books gradually faded from view. This is perhaps partly because she was a woman – most of the authors still celebrated from her generation are men – and partly because she was overshadowed and scorned by Lewis Grassic Gibbon, whose three-part epic *A Scots Quair,* also set in rural Aberdeenshire, dominated the scene and continues to attract international acclaim. Certainly, Shepherd did nothing to promote herself and was uncomfortable with rave reviews. 'Don't you loathe having your work over-praised?' she wrote to author friend Neil Gunn. Most of us can't imagine such a problem.

I wonder what she would make of the demands on today's writers to maintain websites, active social media accounts and a high-ranking online platform, under constant pressure to keep churning out books at speed and get attention in an increasingly crowded and clamorous market. I admire her authenticity. If she had nothing to say, she was silent; if nothing more to write, she stopped. 'I've gone dumb,' she wrote to Gunn in 1931. 'One reaches (or I do) these dumb places in life. I suppose there's nothing for it but to go on living. Speech may come. Or it may not. And if it doesn't I

suppose one has just to be content to be dumb. At least not shout for the mere sake of making a noise.' Hurrah for Nan Shepherd. And hurrah that she went on living in dumbness, for it is only out of such quiet that a work like *The Living Mountain* could ever have been written.

I also admire her unflagging generosity to others. Even when her own books slipped out of print and prominence, she maintained a lively correspondence with her many writer friends and continued to review contemporary work with insight and rigour. She championed Scottish literature in particular by bringing more of it into the curriculum of her teachers' college (previously focused on the English canon) and by supporting Scottish literary organisations, publications and authors. She was a founding member of the Saltire Society and a defender of Hugh MacDiarmid's poetry and his controversial use of Scots. Meanwhile, her own masterpiece about the Cairngorms languished in a drawer. On its completion in 1945 only Neil Gunn read it, and though he insisted on its worth, he warned it would be difficult to sell: immediately post-war, publishers were struggling and risk-averse. He suggested lengthening, serialisation and illustrations, none of which Shepherd pursued. She sent one query letter to his recommended publisher, but when they declined to see the manuscript, she put it away. How characteristic of her not to keep peddling her wares round the marketplace, but how suggestive, also, that perhaps she knew the time wasn't right. As Neil Gunn wrote to her, '[T]he world doesn't want the well-water. It doesn't know that it needs it.'

Thirty years later, the world had changed out of all recognition. The Vietnam war, the social revolutions of the sixties, the emerging environmental movement and the hippy trail to Asia all fostered a greater openness to the philosophical ideas and contemplation of nature explored in

The Living Mountain. Shepherd makes no reference to any of these in her 1977 foreword, focusing solely on the changes to the Cairngorms themselves, and by way of explanation for her decision to publish at last, simply that 'the tale of my traffic with a mountain is as valid today as it was then'. Whether the world was ready or not, she clearly was. Perhaps she was goaded by an interview with a journalist the previous year who published the article under the headline 'Writer of genius gave up'. Perhaps she was persuaded by the handful of people who had, by then, read the manuscript and insisted she must get it into print. Whatever it was, she chose not to undergo further offers and rejections through traditional publishers. She was old and maybe felt she simply didn't have the time. I wonder, also, whether she decided she was done with all those gatekeepers and no longer prepared to wait for their judgements. There is a sense, for me, of a woman late in life who recognised both the value of her work and the time to act. Thankfully for posterity, it was a last-minute triumph of self-belief over her more customary self-deprecation. She did choose to include illustrations, after all, and paid for an initial print-run of 3,000 copies through Aberdeen University Press, who were only printers at the time. Effectively, she self-published it. That's usually a dirty word in traditional publishing circles, associated with vanity, delusion and obvious failure to produce writing of worth. Shepherd clearly knew better. But that still didn't make her a good saleswoman, of her own work, at any rate. With responsibility for all marketing and distribution, she gave away countless copies but only sold a few hundred, leaving most of them sitting in boxes.

It took another thirty years for the book and her writing to finally gain rightful place, partly through the championing of academics like Aileen Christianson, Roderick Watson, Alison Lumsden and Robert Macfarlane – and an ever-

growing number. By now, it has sold hundreds of thousands of copies worldwide, been translated into at least sixteen languages and spawned countless works in response from dance, music, art, photography, a literary prize and further writing, including mine. Who knows what she would make of it all, in particular how she features on the Scottish five-pound note. It is a striking picture showing the quiet strength and intelligence in her face, but in long plaits and a jewelled headband that make her look like a neo-pagan about to invoke the moon goddess. That is not Nan Shepherd. In reality, the photo captures a playful moment during the shoot when the young Nan quickly improvised her accessory with photographic tape and a brooch. She inscribed the picture, 'In the days of my Norse Princess Incarnation.' Sounds like she was just dressing up and having a laugh. That is the Nan Shepherd I recognise. She had a keen sense of humour and a joyous energy and was far too down to earth to indulge fantasy versions of herself.

One of the quotes that accompanies the image is similarly deceptive. 'It's a grand thing to get leave to live,' it says. These words are also on Shepherd's flagstone in the Makars' Court in Edinburgh. They are actually spoken by the character Geordie Ironside in her first novel, *The Quarry Wood*, and come at the moment he kills a chicken by wringing its neck. It's an act Shepherd herself performed many times. As a person and a writer, she was unsentimental and both celebrated life and wryly acknowledged its ironies. The second quote is from *The Living Mountain*: 'But the struggle between frost and the force in running water is not quickly over. The battle fluctuates, and at the point of fluctuation between the motion in water and the immobility of frost, strange and beautiful forms are evolved.' I'm intrigued by this choice from the wealth of rich images in her book, but I've concluded it is an apt one, saying as

much about Shepherd as the environment she is describing. Her writing often explores relationships between elements that can be both separate and united, in opposition and in harmony: '[T]he world, which is one reality, and the self, which is another reality;' a place and the mind; objects and perception; substance and spirit. Just as the battle between freezing and running water gives rise to exquisite formations, so too can the tensions between these other elements create a synthesis of beauty. The struggles Shepherd recounts are often in the effort to establish what is real, and in the dynamic exchange between inner and outer truths, a higher, more whole truth is formed: a consummation that is greater than the sum of its parts. It is a work she calls 'continuous creative act'.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a burgeoning fascination with mysticism and esoteric spiritualities in the 'west', and Shepherd was no exception. In her philosophy I recognise echoes of the prolific author and lecturer Evelyn Underhill, who explored mysticism across different religious traditions but always insisted it was practical and accessible to all. Widely read and respected at her time, she was, like Shepherd, awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Aberdeen, so it's very likely Shepherd knew her work. 'Mysticism,' wrote Underhill, 'is the art of union with Reality.'

At the point of writing about these mountains, both Shepherd and I are in our early fifties, a transitional phase for women where changes in our bodies and our role can mean relegation to the sidelines or, on the other hand, increased freedom and possibilities. Or a mix of both. Shepherd was still working full time and caring for her chronically ill mother, but the passion of her whole-body embrace of the hills suggests it was not just a place of ease, but also of release; a place to express the wildness and sensuality

that was kept in check in her professional and domestic life. But she never makes reference to this. In fact, *The Living Mountain* is fascinating in the way Shepherd says almost nothing about her life or ideas beyond the mountain, yet in taking us there through the intimacy of her bodily experience, she takes us right inside herself. She does not intend herself to be the focus. In the book she is interested in herself only to the extent that she experiences the mountain, and though we inhabit her, it is not to look into her but to look out through her eyes, to listen, feel, smell and taste through her body. Yet she is not just physical sensation; she is also mind, receiving the sensory stimuli, *feeling* them in thought and emotion and responding in words. So, the paradox, of course, is that though she tells us little about her biography, she reveals a great deal about herself. 'For as I penetrate more deeply into the mountain's life,' she writes, 'I penetrate also into my own.'

By the end of the book, have we penetrated into her life? Do we feel we know her? How do you know a person? Or a place? Or anything? These are questions that Shepherd probes throughout *The Living Mountain*. What she seeks to understand about herself is how better to know and to be one with the place, and in so doing, to ignite the inner flame of Being. In the first chapter, she writes of the mountain, '[I]t is to know its essential nature that I am seeking here. To know, that is, with the knowledge that is a process of living.' To 'know' can suggest completion or mastery, but when Shepherd speaks of 'process' she recognises an unfolding of knowledge that is never finished. 'One never quite knows the mountain, nor oneself in relation to it.' For us both, then, the writing is a journey of discovery. The difference is that when she began writing about the Cairngorms, it was after fifty years in the area and twenty-five exploring the range. I, on the other hand, begin with scant knowledge and far

more limited experience – of this range, anyway. But my love of mountains is as old as my memory and so I approach these new ones in Shepherd's own belief that 'love pursued with fervour is one of the roads to knowledge'. I am hungry to know this unique landscape, to seek the hidden fires. Wherever my path will lead, my goal is the same as hers: to go higher up and deeper into the living mountain.